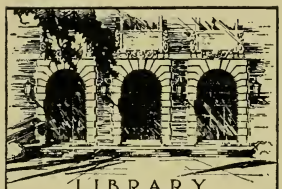

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MISS SHAFTO.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF

"MAJOR AND MINOR," "MY FRIEND JIM," "THE ROGUE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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MISS SHAFTO.

CHAPTER I.

BARON LÄMMERGEIER'S CRUSH.

On a certain evening in the month of June, Baron Lämmergeier, M.P. and his wife gave one of those great crushes for which they were renowned. Anybody, of course, can give a crush; it is not a form of entertainment which, as a general rule, demands any great trouble or expenditure. But Baron Lämmergeier, who was exceptional in that he provided his guests with a magnificent supper and spent as much money upon flowers and music when he gave an evening party as when he gave

a ball, was still more exceptional in regard to the fact that he got people to go to his parties, and was even pestered for invitations to the same. Highly distinguished personages these were, too, some of them. A few, being so very distinguished that they could afford to tell the truth and please themselves, avowed that they came for the sake of seeing the rooms, eating the supper and hearing the music; others, less secure of their position in the social scale, felt bound to give explanations and excuses. "We dined with these people last week," they would whisper to one another, "so we thought we ought just to look in for a few minutes, you know."

At all events, and whatever may have been their motives, there they were in crowds. Grosvenor Place was blocked with carriages; dukes, cabinet ministers, foreign ambassadors, ecclesiastical dignitaries, jostled one another upon the broad staircase, at the top of which Mrs. Lämmergeier stood in all the glory of her

diamonds. Moreover, the *jeunesse dorée* was present in great force, which was no slight social triumph; and whether the 1874 Giesler, which was known to flow without stint under the roof of the hospitable baron, had or had not anything to do with the bringing of it about is a matter of comparatively trifling importance.

Mrs. Lämmergeier had been on duty for about an hour and half when a tall young man with fair hair, which curled tightly all over his head, and a closely-trimmed beard, mounted the stairs and bowed to her. He did not seem quite certain whether to offer her his hand or not, but she held out hers, saying, "How do you do, Lord Walter?" and added, after a moment's pause, "Miss Shafto, let me introduce Lord Walter Sinclair. And will you take him away, please? He is blocking up the gangway."

Lord Walter looked up and smiled. "Do we require an introduction, Miss Shafto?" he asked. "I'm afraid it must

be quite ten years since we last met; but we used to be rather friends once upon a time. In fact, I believe we even went so far as to break a sixpence together when I was fourteen and you were nine."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the young lady whom he addressed, extending her hand to him frankly; "and so you are Walter Sinclair! You used to be such a particularly nice boy."

"You also, if I may be permitted to say so, were rather particularly nice," observed Lord Walter gravely. "I hope we have neither of us changed very much."

But of course they had both changed a great deal in outward appearance, if in nothing else. As he moved slowly towards the great drawing-room (the saloon, Lämmergeier preferred to call it), where the Hungarian band was playing, he stole sidelong glances at his companion and thought to himself, with something of a sigh, how inexorable Time is, and that even full life and progress and development are but other

words for the death of past things. How well he remembered losing his heart to Norma Shafto when he was a boy at Eton! That was in the happy old days when his mother was alive, and when they always used to spend Christmas at Warbury Park. Norma was a jolly, merry little girl who used to try to follow the hounds on her Shetland pony; or, if a hard frost came, he used to skate with her upon the lake at Brampton Priory. She had the most beautiful golden hair that ever was seen, and such eyes! Well, the eyes, to be sure, were as blue as ever, and if their lashes had lengthened and deepened in colour, that was doubtless an improvement; but the hair had changed to brown, though there were still some golden threads in it. And what a tall woman she had become! The truth is that Miss Shafto was just a little bit too tall. Certainly she carried herself well, and she was undeniably beautiful and striking-looking, and if one had met her for the first time one would

not have thought of finding fault with her height or with anything else about her; but Lord Walter could not help being rather annoyed with her for bearing so very little resemblance to his child sweetheart. However, this hostile attitude of his became greatly modified before he had been talking to her for five minutes. The child Norma, it was true, was dead and gone; but then, for the matter of that, so was the boy Walter; and the man Walter could not but acknowledge the charm of Miss Shafto's gracious and kindly presence.

"And what have you been doing with yourself all these years?" she asked. "Somebody—I think it must have been Miss Travers—told me that you were an artist. Is that true?"

"Well, it is near enough," he answered. "I am a sculptor by trade—and a poor sort of trade I have found it, so far."

"But perhaps you haven't got very far yet," Miss Shafto suggested. "At any rate, you must be glad to have an occupa-

tion, and it isn't as if you were obliged to work for your living."

"I assure you I am," answered Lord Walter. "At least, I shall find myself very much pinched if I don't. Our host is a patron of art, I am told. Perhaps he may purchase one of my works some fine day, if I behave nicely to him. Not that it is very easy to behave nicely to him."

"He certainly is not particularly attractive," remarked Miss Shafto in a meditative tone.

"He is the most offensive little beast that I know," said Lord Walter tranquilly.

"Then why do you come to his house?"

"Quite so; there is no answer to rebukes of that kind. All the same, I fancy that if you were to put every man in this room upon his oath, you wouldn't find as large a proportion as five per cent. who would dare to describe their host in any other way. Theoretically, one has no business to eat a man's salt and then say nasty things about him; but practically he gets

his *quid pro quo.* He doesn't ask us here because he loves us, you know, and you might repeat what I said just now to him without preventing him from inviting me to his next crush. I am of no great value; a younger son who is practically a pauper doesn't count for much. But I imagine that Lämmergeier would cheerfully consent to be kicked by a duke, and that he would submit to anything short of decapitation at the hands of a royal highness. As far as we have gone, I think I may say that he and I are about quits. I have had to shake hands with him; but, to set against that, I have met you; and there is the possibility of his giving me an order when my talents dawn upon him."

If Lord Walter had known a little more of Miss Shafto, he would have been surprised at her not taking up the cudgels on Baron Lämmergeier's behalf, for there was nothing that she disliked more than to hear any man spoken ill of behind his back. On this occasion, however, she

remained silent for some seconds. She and her companion had found a little recess with an unoccupied sofa, and had seated themselves there. Presently she resumed: "I hope you don't really mean that you are a pauper. I can't see why you should be."

Lord Walter laughed. "Oh, that was a figure of speech," he answered. "My father left me something. Not as much as he used to allow me during his lifetime, though. So I can't afford to be an idle man."

"But I always thought he was so very rich. You did not quarrel with him, did you? I was half afraid when I saw you here this evening that there might have been something of the kind."

"Why? Oh, I see; you thought I ought not to be going into society so soon after my father's death. Well, I don't know; people don't shut themselves up nowadays; and, after all, one's personal grief isn't affected one way or the other by

seeing one's fellow-creatures. No, there never was any quarrel between the dear old man and me, only he wasn't as rich as he was supposed to be. That is, he hadn't a great deal of ready money, and heavy claims were made upon him of late years, and every stick and stone of his property was entailed. He left me what he could."

The subject was not pursued further. It was notorious that the late Marquis of Loddondale had found the present one a very expensive person to maintain, and that there had been little love lost between the father and son. Miss Shafto may have been cognizant of both circumstances, and may have thought, as a great many other people did, that it was a pity Lord Walter had not come into existence a year or two earlier. After a time she said, "I suppose you are not likely to be much in our part of the world again now?"

The young man shook his head. "I'm afraid not; though possibly I might run

down for a day or two sometimes, for I should think Loddondale would spend a part of the year at Warbury. My father, you know, took a dislike to the place after my mother died."

"I shall be glad if your brother decides to inhabit Warbury again," said Miss Shafto meditatively. "When properties change hands, there is always a danger of subscriptions to the schools and the cottage hospital and so forth dropping off; but if Lord Loddondale is upon the spot, he will see for himself how much poverty there is all round him; and indeed we can ill afford to lose our subscribers. As it is we have great difficulty in keeping things going, because everybody complains of having no money. If I meet your brother, the first thing I shall do will be to beg of him."

A sudden smile passed across Lord Walter's face: the suggestion appeared to tickle him. But he only answered a little drily, "I doubt whether you will meet him; Loddondale doesn't go out into society.

But," he added presently, "I hope *I* shall meet you again before long. When do you go home?"

"I wish I knew!" the girl replied, sighing. "Perhaps we may never go home again. My father wants to let Brampton for a term of years."

"To let Brampton! You don't mean that! Why, I thought Mr. Shafto was as firmly rooted to the soil as one of his own oaks."

"Well, oaks are sometimes uprooted, you know. When farmers can't pay their rents landlords must suffer. My father says—and I am sure he is quite right—that it is much better to change one's style of living altogether than to attempt to go on in the old way after one has lost nearly the half of one's income."

This was so reasonable and sensible a view to take of the situation that Lord Walter could find nothing to urge against it. He only said, "It seems a great pity; but I suppose there's no help for it. What

shall you do, then? Do you think of living in London?"

"Yes, I believe so," the girl answered. "We have taken a house in Upper Belgrave Street, and if a tenant is discovered for Brampton, we shall set about removing our household gods. Fortunately, my father is very cheerful about it, and rather likes the idea of a town life."

"But what about yourself?" Lord Walter inquired. "This will be a painful change for you, won't it? I have heard about you from time to time through old Nell Travers, though you don't appear to have asked any questions about me, and old Nell describes you as a sort of guardian angel to the entire neighbourhood. It is a law of nature that one should love those whom one has benefited, so I suppose you will be sorry to be parted from the poor of Brampton."

Miss Shafto's face clouded over, and she made no reply for some seconds. When she did open her lips it was to remark,

"There are plenty of poor in London too."

"Oh, then it isn't the individuals whom you care for; it's the fact of their poverty that interests you."

"Of course," answered the girl, after a moment of reflection, "that is what makes them interesting; but I do care for the individuals too."

"Then," said Lord Walter, with much presence of mind, "I may for the first time congratulate myself upon being a pauper."

What rejoinder Miss Shafto would have made to a speech which its author upon subsequent reflection felt to have been somewhat silly, must remain a matter of conjecture; for at this moment the interview was broken in upon by a little faded, middle-aged woman, clad in black velvet and diamonds, who said plaintively, "Oh, how do you do, Norma? I have been looking everywhere for some friendly face; but I could discover nobody in this horrid crowd, and I have been jostled and pushed

until all the breath has been knocked out of my body. I wish I hadn't come!"

"How do you do, Mrs. Wilton?" returned Norma. "Where is Madge?"

"Madge is at home in an execrable temper," answered the elder lady, who was evidently smarting under a strong sense of injury. "At the last moment she declared she had a headache and went off to bed. Isn't that just like Madge? Why I was such an idiot as to come here without her I can't think; and I am literally fainting with hunger, and I haven't the courage to force my way into the supper-room all alone and ask for food. Couldn't you pilot me down, Norma? You are big enough to take care of us both, I'm sure."

Miss Shafto laughed. "Perhaps the servants would pay more respect to a gentleman," said she. "Let me introduce Lord Walter Sinclair, who, I know, will be delighted to get you something to eat. Lord Walter and I were playfellows long ago, when his father used sometimes to be

at Warbury Park; but that was before you came to our neighbourhood, I think."

Lord Walter resigned himself to the force of circumstances. He was not best pleased; but he put a good face upon a bad business and offered his arm to Mrs. Wilton, who unhesitatingly clutched it. Perhaps the parting smile with which Miss Shafto rewarded him may have helped him to do his duty with some show of alacrity.

Later in the evening, when he regained his liberty, he sought that companion of his childhood once more, but without success. Instead of her, he encountered his hostess, who said somewhat abruptly, "Well; how is Elizabeth of Hungary getting on?"

The young man raised his eyebrows, for his acquaintance with Mrs. Lämmergeier was but a slight one, and he was a good deal surprised by her question. "Thank you," he replied gravely, "Elizabeth of Hungary is getting on as well as can be

expected—which is not very well. May I venture to ask how you come to know anything about her?"

Mrs. Lämmergeier made a half turn, so as to face him, kicked out her train and laughed. "I had the honour and pleasure of sitting beside you at dinner a few weeks ago," she answered. "You told me that you were a sculptor and that the work upon which you were engaged was a representation of Elizabeth of Hungary. I didn't know who she was at the time; but I looked her out in the Encyclopædia when I got home, and I thought to myself that you would make a mess of your subject. I wasn't very far wrong, it seems."

"You were quite right," answered Lord Walter; "I am making a mess of it. I don't know why you should have foreseen that, though."

"It wasn't such a very difficult thing to foresee. I should imagine that there would be some preliminary trouble in the matter of costume. The back view, for instance,

would be apt to be a trifle ridiculous. Then of course you would represent her holding her basket of loaves which have just been miraculously converted into roses; so that your representation would require an explanation, which I should think would be a serious drawback. The ignorant spectator would see nothing in your work except a mediæval flower-girl of saintly demeanour, and the combination might strike him as a shade grotesque."

"You are a very severe critic, Mrs. Lämmergeier," remarked Lord Walter, whose smile betrayed some inward annoyance.

"I was only telling you why I expected you to fail. After all, it doesn't greatly signify whether you fail or succeed, I suppose. One pities a professional who has wasted his time, because in that case loss of time means loss of bread and butter; but an amateur has as much bread and butter as he can eat and more time than he knows how to employ."

"Well, I am not an amateur, at any rate," returned the young man. "I suppose I mustn't venture to call myself a professional yet; but I hope to become one, and I shall be very much disappointed if my profession doesn't bring me in a little more bread and butter."

"Really?" said Mrs. Lämmergeier, with a quick glance at her neighbour. "Then let me strongly advise you to go in for busts. I am convinced that that is the most lucrative thing. Why not do a bust of Hermann? He would be sure to pay handsomely, and the subject would be a pleasing one."

The above colloquy had been by no means continuous. Mrs. Lämmergeier had been repeatedly interrupted, and more than once her interlocutor would have passed on, leaving the field free for others, if she had not laid a detaining hand upon his arm. He paused now, feeling doubtful whether she was laughing at him or at her husband or at both of them, and he had

not yet thought of a rejoinder which should be at once polite and snubbing (for it struck him that a gentle snub would do this free-spoken woman no harm), when she turned away and left him.

He knew very little of his entertainers, and, as he had frankly informed Miss Shafto, the little that he did know had not prepossessed him in their favour. They were, however, people who had of late become very generally known, and at whose house, as has already been said, distinguished personages did not hesitate to show themselves. Now, it might have been thought that a little black-a-vised Jew of doubtful nationality and untraceable origin would have been satisfied with such a company as was assembled under his roof on the evening in question; but Baron Lämmergeier was not satisfied, and perhaps if he had been the kind of man to content himself with anything short of the very best that could be procured, he would not have been where he was. The company

which he was wont to entertain, though good enough for most of us, was not quite the very best imaginable, for it included no royalties and was likewise denied the countenance of a few of those rare and old-fashioned members of the British aristocracy who do not care to be entertained by persons unprovided with authentic great-grandfathers. This vexed Lämmergeier, because he felt it to be so perfectly unreasonable. What in the world would they have? he asked himself, with pardonable indignation. When one is a sort of minor Rothschild, when one has been educated at Eton and Oxford and is a naturalized Englishman and represents a London constituency, besides grudging neither 1874 Giesler nor strawberries in January, nor anything else that the most exacting *bon-vivant* can desire to eat or drink, surely one is entitled to expect the recognition of the highest in the land! However as he was nothing if not persevering, and as he possessed a fine belief

in himself, he meant to have that recognition sooner or later. And, to be sure, he was still in some sense a new man. That is to say that, although he had had a rich father and had never lacked money, it was only of late years that he had amassed the colossal fortune with which he was now credited.

How Baron Lämmergeier's wealth had been acquired and what his precise avocations were only a very few of his guests knew. Some said that he was a banker and had had extensive dealings with continental governments — indeed, it was noticeable that the representatives of foreign nations were remarkably civil to him—but for the most part his friends were content to describe him as "the great City man, don't you know," which definition was doubtless accurate enough for all ordinary intents and purposes. In person Baron Lämmergeier could scarcely be called pleasing. He was a short, stout man, with a hooked nose (through which he talked),

a waxed moustache, a double chin, and a pair of glittering little eyes. His hair, which was coal-black and very thick, he wore cut close to his head. His age at this time was about forty, but his rotund figure and the deep horizontal lines upon his forehead made him look older. There were people who thought his manners pleasant, and there were others who held a different opinion. It is difficult to speak positively upon a question which is so much one of taste; but at any rate there can be little doubt but that he meant his manners to be pleasant. He had been for some years married to the daughter and sole heiress of a deceased London banker, and it was rumoured that her large fortune had been already doubled by the astute manipulation of her husband.

Mrs. Lämmergeier's manners did not at all resemble those of her lord. It is probable that she also differed from him in not caring particularly whether they were pleasant or not. However, like many

other brusque people, she conveyed the impression to those who were brought into contact with her that she was honest. Her visiting-cards bore the inscription of "Mrs. Lämmergeier," and she preferred to be so addressed. "Hermann is really a baron, I believe," she would remark; "but where he got his barony from is more than I can tell you. Anyhow, it isn't an English one, so I don't think I will use a coronet just at present." Plain-featured and insignificant looking, her hair, eyes, and complexion being all of varying shades of the same whitey-brown hue, she nevertheless presented a sufficiently imposing appearance when arrayed for the evening. Perhaps her dressmaker knew how to make the best of her; perhaps the size and number of her diamonds would have made anybody look imposing. It should be added however that she had that perfect ease and *aplomb* which one occasionally encounters in the most unexpected quarters, and sometimes misses where one would naturally

look to find it. By the few who knew her well she was considered to be a shrewd observer, and perhaps a casual remark which she made in the course of the evening to one of these few intimates may be taken as affording some testimony to the accuracy of their estimate.

"I have seen just two persons in this crowd who have interested me," said she. "One is a young lady who goes in for practical philanthropy, and the other is a sprig of nobility who is going in for art. What is singular is that the young lady is an optimist and the artist is a pessimist. To be sure, they neither of them know what they are, so one can't hold them responsible for their views."

CHAPTER II.

MISS SHAFTO'S FATHER.

While Miss Shafto had been renewing acquaintance with Lord Walter Sinclair, there might have been seen, wandering restlessly about the crowded rooms, a tall, silver-haired old man, whose features bore so strong a family likeness to hers that any one who did not already know him to be her father would at once have divined the relationship.

He might almost have been her grandfather, so much older was he than she, and she was in fact by many years the youngest of his children, as well as the only survivor of them. The loss of his wife and of three sons may have added to or deepened the lines which Time had drawn upon Mr.

Shafto's face; yet it was by no means the face of an unhappy man. Since it resembled his daughter's, it was of course a handsome face; but closer examination showed that it differed from hers in one or two important particulars, notably in the set of the mouth, which betokened irresolution and irritability, whereas the curve of hers was as yet unspoiled. Any physician who had been called in to attend Mr. Shafto would have seen at a glance that his patient had a highly-strung nervous organization, and would probably have prescribed bread pills with perfect confidence in results. The forehead was broad and lofty, the brows arched, the blue eyes wide open and somewhat eager in expression; but the jaw was defective, and the lower lip inclined to be tremulous at times. Mr. Shafto belonged to that order of beings whose perceptions are keen and whose emotions are easily excited, but who lack stability. He had been broken-hearted when his wife died; he had been broken-

hearted when his two healthy schoolboys were carried off, one after the other, by scarlet fever; he had been broken-hearted when his eldest son and heir was taken from him in early manhood, after a far from satisfactory career. But in each and all of these cases the fracture had been found to be reparable.

At the present time, owing to agricultural depression, he was a comparatively poor man, after having been a comparatively rich one—a state of things so intolerable to one of his generous and careless temper that, instead of submitting to it, he had determined to turn his back upon it. For such an alternative there is always something to be said; but there is very little to be said in favour of the scheme which now occupied Mr. Shafto's sanguine brain—that, namely, of replenishing his empty coffers by the buying and selling of speculative securities. Baron Lämmergeier, it was reported, had realized an enormous fortune by no other means; but then

Baron Lämmergeier was not precisely an every-day individual, nor were his methods of operating such as could be safely emulated by an inexperienced country gentleman. Mr. Shafto, however, had resolved to emulate them in a humble way, and what was more, he counted upon Lämmergeier to assist him in so doing. He had, or thought he had, claims upon the goodwill of the millionaire which the latter, for his part, had never been slow to acknowledge. Lämmergeier, as has been already mentioned, had been educated at Eton and Oxford, and at both of these places of learning he had been intimate with young Tom Shafto. The true story of Tom Shafto's short life had never been revealed to his father. That he had, unfortunately, become imbued with a taste for backing horses, and that he had, still more unfortunately, taken to drinking and other forms of dissipation—these things were avowed by the culprit himself and notorious to all who knew him. But the precise

nature of his transactions with Lämmergeier had not been made so clear. On three several occasions his father had had to pay up sums varying from two to three thousand pounds for him, and on his deathbed the young man declared that Lämmergeier had had all the money. Moreover, he stated that he still owed two thousand in the same quarter, and called Lämmergeier an infernal thief. But, after all, he was half delirious when he said these things, and Lämmergeier behaved very well in the matter. He absolutely refused to take the two thousand pounds which Mr. Shafto offered to him after poor Tom had been laid in his grave. He acknowledged that he had from time to time made advances to his deceased friend, but these, he said, had been repaid with interest, and he doubted whether anything more was due to him. In any case, he would not accept more. Did Mr. Shafto take him for a money-lender? he asked, with some indignation.

Out of these somewhat unpromising circumstances a friendship had sprung up between the country squire and the Jewish financier which had not ceased when the latter attained that high position in the commercial and social world which he occupied at the time selected for the opening of this narrative.

It was therefore not unnatural that, in taking up what might probably prove to be a permanent residence in London, Mr. Shafto should have been willing to accept the hospitality of the wealthy denizens of the house in Grosvenor Place; and on this evening he had been especially anxious to do so, because he wanted very much to put a few questions to his host upon matters of business.

"Have you seen Lämmergeier anywhere?" he kept asking of the friends and acquaintances who stopped him as he elbowed his way through the rooms. He had a great many acquaintances, and nearly all of them might have been described as

his friends. Everybody liked Mr. Shafto, because he liked and took an interest in everybody, or at any rate seemed to do so.

At length, standing beneath the awning on the balcony, he came upon the object of his search, who was engaged in earnest conversation with the sallow envoy of a South American Republic. Mr. Shafto paused, not wishing to interrupt a colloquy of international importance; but Lämmergeier, who may have been willing to be interrupted, at once made him a sign of recognition, and shook off his diplomatic friend, saying, "Vous voyez bien, mon cher Ministre, qu'il me faudra réfléchir avant de vous donner une réponse définitive."

Then he stepped out of the balcony into the room, holding out a fat hand. "My dear Mr. Shafto," said he, "you are the very man whom I wanted to see."

"How are you, Lämmergeier?" returned Mr. Shafto, heartily. "I wanted to see you too. About those shares——"

"To be sure, my dear friend, to be sure! What shares?"

"The Rio Cuzco mining shares, you know."

"Ah, you hold Rio Cuzcos?'

"Why, you advised me to buy them. Don't you remember?"

"Did I indeed? Very likely—very likely! Well, now I advise you to sell."

"But, my dear Lämmergeier," said Mr. Shafto, looking a little blue, "if I do that, I shall lose half my principal."

Lämmergeier shrugged his shoulders. "Better to lose the half than the whole, perhaps. But make your mind easy, Mr. Shafto; I will see that you are not a loser. What was the amount of your original venture? Five thousand?—six thousand?"

"Oh dear, no! only a thousand. Still you understand——"

"Ah, bah! I will give you a thousand for your shares to-morrow. It is I who am responsible; and after all, the speculation may yet prove a paying one. Pray

do not protest or think of thanking me; there is quite a good chance that I shall have the best of the bargain in the long run."

Anybody who knew Baron Lämmergeier would have been prepared to agree with him as to that probability; but perhaps Mr. Shafto did not know him very well, and it certainly sounded generous to offer a thousand pounds for shares which would barely have fetched five hundred in the open market. The old gentleman accordingly did protest until Lämmergeier, laughing, stuffed his fingers into his ears and said, "Now, now! I will not listen any more. I want you to listen to me instead. Tell me, have you yet found a tenant for Brampton Priory?"

Mr. Shafto shook his head. "Not I! We haven't had so much as a nibble yet. The agents declare that they can't let country houses for a term of years in these days. People take a place for six months, they say, and then get sick of it and go off somewhere else."

"Well," said Lämmergeier, "I think I know a man who would be quite inclined to take Brampton for three years, with option of renewal for seven."

"The deuce you do! Would he agree to my terms, I wonder? Who is he?"

"Sir Christopher Shearman—you may have heard of him. His father was made a baronet because he was an ironmaster. At least, I have been told that that was the reason; but as his father is dead and buried, it don't signify. Sir Christopher is a very rich man, and he is anxious to settle in Stourshire. I don't think there would be any difficulty about terms if he fancied the place."

"Anxious to settle in the county, is he? But why?—what's his reason for that?" asked Mr. Shafto inquisitively.

"That I can't tell you for certain; but between ourselves, I fancy that he has thoughts of contesting the southern division when a vacancy occurs. In the Conservative interest, of course; I should

never think of recommending a Radical tenant to you."

Baron Lämmergeier was a staunch Tory, and had high notions with regard to the destiny of the Empire which could not boast the honour of having produced him.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Shafto, who perhaps felt that he could afford to be more tolerant, "so long as the man paid his rent, I shouldn't bother my head much about his politics. Is he here this evening by any chance?"

Baron Lämmergeier believed that he was, and added that he would be enchanted to make two such good friends of his known to one another.

A few minutes later his two good friends were shaking hands. Sir Christopher Shearman was a short, thickset, broad-shouldered man, with a somewhat florid complexion. His hair and beard were of a lightish brown hue, the former having a few grey threads in it and having become rather thin upon the top of his head. He

had a hearty, jovial sort of manner, tempered by a suspicion of shyness. He fidgeted about a good deal while he talked and was apparently averse to looking straight at the person to whom he was talking.

"As far as I could judge from a distant view, your place would suit me down to the ground, Mr. Shafto," said he. "Perhaps you'll authorize me to make a visit of inspection, and then we'll leave the rest to the agents, eh?"

"Quite so," agreed Mr. Shafto. "By all means, inspect Brampton any day that may suit you, and if you'll kindly let me know when you think of running down, I'll see that luncheon shall be ready for you. I think you would like our neighbourhood. You would find plenty of pleasant people within easy reach, and there's always something or other going on. You're a married man of course?"

"Oh no," answered Sir Christopher, laughing a little, "I ain't a married man yet. The fact is that I haven't an acre or

a stone to call my own, except a little shooting-box, and a man can't very well marry until he has a house to take his wife to, can he?"

The obvious inference was that Sir Christopher contemplated matrimony at an early date. This, however, was no business of Mr. Shafto's, who changed the subject, and was gratified to learn that his intending tenant was a keen sportsman. "If hunting and shooting are what you want," he declared, "I can promise you plenty of both in Stourshire. I don't say that either is absolutely first rate; but when one finds the two things together, one hardly expects that."

Sir Christopher gave it to be understood that he would be satisfied with something short of a combination of Norfolk and Leicestershire, and Mr. Shafto went off in high good humour to seek his daughter.

Having found her, he lost no time in letting her hear his news.

"What do you think, Norma? I really

believe I've got a tenant for Brampton. A very good fellow he seems to be. Fond of sport and as rich as Crœsus, Lämmergeier says. Sir Christopher Shearman—did you ever hear of him?"

"Yes, I have heard of him," answered Norma, after considering for a moment; "Mrs. Wilton was speaking about him the other day."

"Oh, Mrs. Wilton knows him, does she? That's all right; then he'll have friends close at hand to start with. That's capital. Now, Norma, what do you say to going home? Have you had enough of this?"

Miss Shafto had had quite enough of it, and expressed her willingness to depart. If in her heart she had harboured a half-acknowledged hope that Brampton Priory might not be let, after all, and that she and her father might be compelled to return thither, she was very properly ashamed of her selfishness and allowed no indication of disappointment to appear upon her face.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNSUCCESSFUL DINNER.

One afternoon, a day or two after the Lämmergeier entertainment, Norma Shafto was busily engaged in addressing and stamping envelopes when Lord Walter Sinclair was announced.

"I'm afraid I am interrupting you," he said, as she rose from her writing-table. "Are you sending out invitations for a ball?"

"Oh no," she answered, laughing; "we don't attempt balls, I am thankful to say. We haven't sufficient space for that, and I am not sure that we have a sufficiently large acquaintance either. These missives are directed, for the most part, to people whom I have never seen."

The table was covered with lithographed half-sheets of paper, one of which Lord Walter took the liberty of examining. He drew down the corners of his mouth and raised his eyebrows a little as he perused it. "Do you go in for this kind of thing?" he inquired.

"I have begun to go in for it during the last few weeks. Why do you look as if you disapproved?"

"I don't disapprove," answered Lord Walter; "I have no right to disapprove. It's very good and very kind of you and your friends. Only it isn't of the very slightest use, you know."

The paper which he held in his hand conveyed an appeal to the benevolent to assist, either by money contributions or by personal effort, in providing innocent recreation for the inhabitants of a poor district of London.

"But I don't know anything of the sort," Miss Shafto declared. "To amuse these people for an evening and to keep them

out of the public-houses is of some use, surely."

"Not much, I'm afraid. What is the matter with John Smith isn't that he is in want of amusement, but that he is in want of work, and consequently in want of food and clothing. I doubt whether your recreation-rooms will make him forget his troubles. And gin is cheap."

"It isn't cheap if you spend all your spare money upon it. Besides you take no account of John Smith's wife and children."

"What business has he with a wife and children?"

"I don't know, but there they are."

"Yes; and if the worst comes to the worst, the ratepayers will preserve them from death by hunger. More than that neither the ratepayers nor anybody else can do. The evil is in the constitution of society, and all the pretty modern palliatives are doomed to failure. One of these days we shall have a revolution, I suppose, and some of us will probably be shot or hanged;

though I have never been able to see why we are to blame."

Miss Shafto looked grave, and reflected for a few seconds. "I know something about the agricultural poor," she said presently; "I don't know much about large towns. But if there is really no cure for all this misery—and I am by no means convinced yet that there is none—palliatives, as you call them, are at least better than utter indifference. We aren't so ambitious as you seem to think; but we do what little we can."

Lord Walter had at one time examined into the social problems arising out of excess of population, over-crowding, competition, drunkenness and the like, and had read a great many Blue Books bearing upon these subjects. The conclusion at which he had arrived was a disheartening one, and it made him impatient of the futile panaceas of well-meaning persons. Nevertheless, he admired Miss Shafto for engaging in a kindly work—or else he

admired the work because Miss Shafto was engaged in it. Possibly, if she had been a sour-faced old maid, with a pair of spectacles and a dowdy gown, he would have changed the subject; but as it was, a five-pound note was withdrawn from his pocket and placed in the young lady's white palm.

"I'll do likewise," said he; "I'll do what little I can."

Whereupon Miss Shafto pointed out to him that, although five-pound notes were all very well and they were much indebted to him for his generosity, that was not quite all that he could do towards helping his less fortunate fellow-creatures. "Why shouldn't you come and talk to them?" she asked. "You could tell them all sorts of things about art which would be sure to interest them."

"Now, Miss Shafto, do you really believe that they would thank me for offering them a stone, even though it should have been chiselled by Michael Angelo, when what they ask for is bread? I can under-

stand that a comic song might be welcome as a diversion; but unfortunately I can't sing comic songs."

"No," said the girl, laughing, "you don't look as if you could. But I believe there are others who can and do."

She was proceeding to give some details as to the various methods by which it was proposed to enlarge the intellectual and moral range of the masses, when she was interrupted by the entrance of her father, who came into the room, talking hurriedly and disjointedly, as was his wont, though there was seldom any necessity for him to be in a hurry.

"Now, Norma dear, if you can spare me a cup of tea I shall be grateful. Such a day! Business of one kind or another from breakfast-time until now, except for just an hour about two o'clock, when Lämmergeier kindly insisted upon giving me some luncheon. Hullo! who's this? Oh! Lord Walter Sinclair, isn't it? Very glad to see you. Your father and I used to be

great allies once upon a time. You have taken up sculpture as an occupation, Norma tells me. Happy man to be able to do it! Perhaps you'll let me look in at your studio one of these days. Nobody is more fond of art than I am, though I don't pretend to know much about it."

In spite of this modest disclaimer, Mr. Shafto did know something about art, and he managed to say what he knew in such a manner as to please and interest his hearer; which—considering that the latter had been disposed to set him down as an unmitigated bore—showed that he himself was a somewhat artful person. "I wish," he said, after a time, "you would stay and dine with us. Mrs. Wilton and her daughter are coming, and Sir Christopher Shearman, who proposes to be my tenant at Brampton. But of course you're engaged."

As a matter of fact Lord Walter was engaged, and he was not one of those unscrupulous persons who think nothing of sending an excuse to their would-be

entertainers when it is far too late to find substitutes for them. Nevertheless he answered, "Thank you, Mr. Shafto. I can't very well stay as I am; but if you will allow me to go home and dress, I should like very much to dine with you."

Now Mr. Shafto was a very nice old gentleman and had an extremely pleasant manner; but the inducement of dining in his company would perhaps hardly have sufficed in itself to make Lord Walter throw over an older friend, as well as one who would have been likely to give him a much better dinner. The little that he had seen of Mrs. Wilton had not greatly prepossessed him in favour of that lady, and of Sir Christopher Shearman he neither knew nor wanted to know anything at all. It seemed pretty clear therefore that Miss Shafto must be responsible for the breach of courtesy which he proposed to commit; and while he was dressing he said to himself, with a slight laugh, that he supposed she was. The reason why he

laughed was that he considered himself quite the reverse of an impressionable man, and it struck him as funny that he should be putting himself at all out of the way for the sake of any young woman in the world.

Yet when he returned to Upper Belgrave Street and was received by Miss Shafto, who was the only occupant of the drawing-room, he came to the conclusion that it was not, after all, so very funny that he should be interested in her; for certainly she was unlike any of the other young women whom he had previously encountered in the world, and if he had persuaded himself that her philanthropy differed from the futile and short-sighted philanthropy which has become a part of modern fashionable life, that was perhaps excusable on his part, seeing how very handsome she was. Just as he was about to resume the discussion which her father had cut short in the afternoon, Mrs. Wilton was announced. Horizontal wrinkles were visible upon Mrs.

Wilton's brow; the corners of her mouth were drawn down distressfully, and her first words intimated that she was not less aggrieved than she had been on the night of Baron Lämmergeier's reception. Her grievance, too, it appeared, was the same now as it had been then.

"My dear Norma," she began, in her high, querulous voice, "I am quite ashamed to show my face here without Madge; but you know what Madge is! Not until five o'clock this afternoon did she calmly inform me that she had engaged herself to dine with Ethel Langley and go to the theatre afterwards. I asked her when she had made that engagement, and she said, 'Ages ago'—which, of course, was ridiculous. My dear, when you have daughters of your own, let me warn you and implore you not to spoil them by sparing the rod while they are young. I know perfectly well that it is entirely owing to my foolish indulgence that I am treated as a mere zero by my children in my—my middle age."

"I won't forget your advice, Mrs. Wilton," answered Norma, laughing; "my children, if I ever have any, shall be whipped before being sent to bed every night. All the same, I can forgive Madge for preferring the play to a dull little dinner with us."

"Well, you are very good-natured to say so, and to be sure she can see you any day. It isn't her rudeness to you that annoys me; it's——" Here Mrs. Wilton came to an abrupt pause, and possibly she did not complete her sentence quite as she had originally intended when she added, "It's so disrespectful to Mr. Shafto, you know."

"What is disrespectful to Mr. Shafto?" inquired that gentleman, who now hurried into the room. "It's very disrespectful of Mr. Shafto, I'm afraid, to come downstairs after two of his guests have arrived. And what has become of my friend Madge? Not knocked up with her dissipations, I hope?"

On being informed at full length of the delinquencies of the absent Madge, Mr. Shafto showed himself not less lenient than his daughter, in spite of which Mrs. Wilton continued to look dissatisfied.

Lord Walter, who had been languidly listening to her and wishing that she would drop an uninteresting topic, wondered at her persistent harping upon it until the party was completed by the arrival of Sir Christopher Shearman. Then he began to understand what was the matter.

Sir Christopher was in many respects a child of Nature. His features were wont to exhibit a ready and faithful reflection of his emotions, and anything more comical than his look of blank disappointment, after he had eagerly scanned the room in search of somebody who was not there, Lord Walter had seldom witnessed. Not a little comical, too, was the precipitation with which Mrs. Wilton explained to the new-comer how vexed her daughter had

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been that a previous engagement to a "tiresome cousin" had prevented her from joining their friendly little gathering. Mrs. Wilton might be an excellent mother, but she was obviously not the most skilful of diplomatists. While she was pouring forth her mendacious harangue, Lord Walter chanced to catch Norma's eye, and smiled, receiving an answering smile, which however was at once repressed.

For his own part, he naturally did not care very much whether Miss Wilton pleased herself or her mother and Sir Christopher; but the results of selfishness, like those of other vices, are far-reaching, and a party composed of five persons frequently has reason to deplore the lack of a sixth. Lord Walter did not mind walking into the dining-room by himself, although he was clearly entitled to take precedence of a baronet; but he did object very strongly to Miss Shafto's attention being monopolized by his supplanter, and this was the more annoying because his

supplanter's conduct at the beginning of dinner was not such as to merit kindness or consideration. Sir Christopher was both sulky and rude. He said some fellows had asked him to stay the night at Ascot, and he wished to goodness he had done so, instead of hurrying back to London. Also he made a very ugly face at the first *entrée* and dropped his fork ostentatiously after swallowing a mouthful of it. By the time that he had twice yawned in an undisguised and offensive manner and had declared his intention of getting to bed early for once, Lord Walter, though not of a choleric temperament, was ready to kick him out into the street.

But Miss Shafto submitted to all this discourtesy with perfect good humour. She treated her guest very much as if he had been a refractory child, ignoring his petulance, patiently endeavouring to amuse him, and laughing with a very fair imitation of heartiness at the feeble jokes which he began to crack after his second glass of

champagne. To Lord Walter it seemed strange enough that she should take so much trouble about an ill-conditioned fellow like that, but he supposed that she must have her reasons, and it was plain that, so far as immediate results were concerned, she had her reward. Long before dinner was at an end Sir Christopher's surliness had given place to a familiar and somewhat noisy jocularity which one of his hearers thought scarcely an improvement upon his former mood. But that hearer was prejudiced and hard to please. Miss Shafto appeared to be quite satisfied with her handiwork. Having achieved so signal a success with one of her neighbours, she was now able to bestow a little more notice upon the other, and during the last half-hour that he spent in the dining-room Lord Walter could not fairly complain of being neglected. However, anything like comfortable conversation was impossible while Sir Christopher persisted in striking in with some foolish and irrelevant obser-

vation every other minute. There was evidently nothing for it but to await the departure of that obnoxious personage.

This did not take place quite as early in the evening as might have been expected and hoped; but at eleven o'clock he jumped up and took leave of his hostess, with whom he had for some time previously been engaged in an earnest colloquy which Lord Walter had not cared to interrupt. The latter dropped into the vacant place as Sir Christopher disappeared through the doorway. Mr. Shafto and Mrs. Wilton were busy over a game of cribbage, so that he could put any question he pleased to Norma without fear of being overheard; and the question which it pleased him to put was, "May I venture to ask why you were so kind to that overgrown lout?"

"Well," she answered, "I am sorry for him."

"But why? He came here, I presume, to meet Miss Wilton, and he didn't meet her. That, no doubt, was a bore for him,

but it didn't excuse his behaving like a savage."

"I don't think he could help himself, poor fellow. He told me just now that he was afraid he had been very rude and that he was sorry for it. What more could he say? I rather like people who can't conceal their feelings; it shows a sort of honesty, don't you think so? You didn't mind my asking him to take me down to dinner, I hope?"

"Not in the least," answered Lord Walter, smiling.

"I was sure you wouldn't, and I was sure he would be very much put out if he were left to walk downstairs alone. Besides, if you insist on knowing the whole truth, I am very anxious to keep upon good terms with Sir Christopher Shearman, because he has taken Brampton, and I want him to be kind to the poor people in the neighbourhood."

"He doesn't look as if he had a very large supply of the milk of human kind-

ness in his composition; but I trust you may be successful. Who and what is Miss Wilton? And why did she refuse to come here and meet the amiable Sir Christopher?"

Norma shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Madge is Madge," she replied. "When you have seen her you will be able to form your own opinion as to what she is. What I fear she never will be is Lady Shearman."

"Do you mean to say that you would like her to be Lady Shearman? Then of course she isn't a friend of yours."

"She is a great friend of mine, and her mother would like her to be Lady Shearman. I am not quite sure whether I wish it or not; I think she might do worse. But she will please herself, so it doesn't much matter what anybody may wish. Let us talk about something else. Have you a studio, Lord Walter? And is it open to the inspection of humble admirers of art, like my father and myself?"

"I shall be only too proud, Miss Shafto,

if you will deign to pay me a visit. I have nothing of my own that is worthy of your notice, but I do possess a few trifles by other people which you might care to look at. Perhaps you would come to tea with me some afternoon. Next Thursday, for instance?"

Norma consulted an engagement-book. "Yes," she answered, "so far as I know, Thursday will suit us very well. I will write you down for five o'clock."

Mr. Shafto, having finished his game of cribbage, said he was sure he didn't know. "Thursday—h'm! I might or I might not be free. I think you had better not make any arrangement, Norma."

But Mrs. Wilton, who, like Sir Christopher Shearman, may have felt that she had displayed her sentiments somewhat too openly in the earlier part of the evening, and who may have desired to make amends for her incivility, struck in with, "I shall be delighted to chaperon you, Norma dear, if Lord Walter will kindly extend his in-

vitation to us. There is nothing that I enjoy more than visiting studios."

So Lord Walter went away in pretty good spirits, notwithstanding the fact that he had spent a somewhat dull evening.

CHAPTER IV.

FRIENDLY CRITICS.

SOMETHING might be said in favour of the law of primogeniture; but it would be scarcely worth while to say it, since everybody is agreed that the law will be abrogated ere long. In favour of the principle, which may be expected to survive the law for a time, a certain number of voices will doubtless also be raised; but amongst these it is improbable that the voices of younger sons will be loud or vehement.

To be the younger son of a marquis, to have been brought up in the enjoyment of every luxury, and finally to be left to fight your way through the world as best you may, with a few hundreds a year for your portion, is not, one must confess, an

enviable lot, and one might even go so far as to say that there is a certain taint of injustice about it. Lord Walter Sinclair had been in some respects more hardly used than younger sons generally are; inasmuch as he had found himself, at his father's death, in possession of an income smaller than that which his father had been accustomed to allow him. For this unpleasant state of affairs he did not blame the late Lord Loddondale, who indeed had been but little to blame in the matter; but he did sometimes feel a slight sense of grievance against the present holder of the title and estates, to whose extravagance the diminution in the paternal savings was wholly and solely due.

Lord Walter, however, was not a greedy man, and had acquired a certain measure of philosophy at the expense of some loss of faith in human nature. He had lived in the world (in the sense of having lived in what is called "society") and had seen a good deal of it, and had learnt to expect

remarkably little of his fellow-mortals. He was pretty well educated, his inclinations having led him to take advantage of such opportunities as Eton and Oxford afford. He knew a great deal more about art than most amateurs and as much as a good many professionals. Quite recently he had determined to adopt as a profession what he had at first regarded merely as an amusement, and he was by no means without hope of eventually making a substantial addition to his means by modelling clay.

"You'll have to work for your living, Walter, I fear," old Lord Loddondale had said to him on his death-bed; to which he had replied quite sincerely, that that would be better than having just enough to live upon without working.

He occupied a small, but very artistically furnished dwelling in the neighbourhood of Holland Park, and his studio was a commodious and well-lighted one.

Now it came to pass that he was standing in this studio one afternoon, with his

pipe in his mouth, gazing despondently at the half-finished figure of Elizabeth of Hungary, which Mrs. Lämmergeier had so unmercifully criticized, when an altogether unexpected visitor strolled in, without having gone through the preliminary form of knocking at the door. This was a small, natty-looking man, who seemed to be about thirty years of age and whose outward appearance was that of a stud-groom out of place. His hair, which was of a reddish tinge, was cropped close to his head; his face was clean-shaven; he wore a white linen scarf with a horseshoe pin in it, and had a cigar of large size in his mouth. His features were insignificant, except in so far as that his eyes had a keen and almost cunning expression and that there was a determined set about his thin lips. At a glance one would have perceived him to be a man of whom it would be difficult to get the better; and indeed that is a description of him in which he himself would have cordially concurred.

"Thought I'd look you up, Walter," said he, seating himself astride upon the nearest chair. "Hope I'm not interrupting you."

"How are you, Warbury?" returned Lord Walter, addressing his elder brother by the title which the latter had until recently borne. "No; you're not interrupting me at all. I've been hard at work all the morning, and I think I shall have to wait until to-morrow before undoing what I have done."

"Is that the system you generally go upon?" asked Lord Loddondale. "If so, I should think it might save time and trouble to do no work at all. Who is the young woman with the basket and the game leg?"

"That settles it," said Lord Walter, laughing; "I shall have to make a fresh start with her now. I knew that left leg was all wrong; but I was trying to persuade myself that the defect was hardly perceptible. However, if such a good

judge of anatomy as you are pronounces Queen Elizabeth of Hungary lame, lame she must be, and there's nothing for it but to obliterate her."

"My dear chap, there can't be the slightest question about her lameness; she would come down on her head if she tried to run a yard. I thought, of course, you meant her to be lame. I don't know," continued Lord Loddondale meditatively, "that I ever heard of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. I've heard of Queen Elizabeth of England."

"Yes; so have I. She was a different historical character. Presumptuous as I am, I should hardly dare to reproduce her ruff and hoop in marble."

"You wouldn't, eh? Marble's pretty expensive, I suppose?"

"It isn't very cheap."

"So that I dare say it would cost you a hundred or two to turn out a statue of that size. And then it wouldn't be quite fifty to one that anybody would buy it."

"No; the odds upon that event would certainly be less."

"A good bit less, I expect. Might even be a shade the other way. Well now, you know, Walter, if I were you, I should drop this statuary business—I should indeed. Why not go in for something rather less risky? Wine, for instance, or timber. Those are things which have to be supplied to the public every day, whereas I'm blessed if I believe that there can be any great demand for statues, even for sound ones—which yours ain't, it seems."

"Thank you very much for your advice," answered Lord Walter gravely.

"I suppose that means, 'None of your beastly cheek!' Well, I really don't mean to be cheeky, and I wouldn't for the world deny that you can sculp or sculpt, or whatever the proper word is, better than most fellows. Only, you see, the question is, whether you can make money by it."

"That," agreed Lord Walter, "is the question, no doubt."

"And it don't look to me very much as if you could or would; and I know you must be hardish up. Now, I'll tell you what I came here for to-day, Walter; I came to say to you fairly and squarely that if you choose to get yourself into difficulties, you mustn't expect me to keep on pulling you out and starting you off again."

Lord Walter reddened slightly. "It is very kind and thoughtful of you to give me that warning," said he; "but don't you think you might have waited until I asked you to help me out of a difficulty?"

"Why, no; because then it would have been a little too late. One can't let one's brother starve. At least, I believe it isn't considered to be the right thing. I like to know where I am and let other people know what they have to expect, that's all. And now that we understand one another so far, I've got something more to say which isn't quite so unpleasant. I quite

admit, Walter, that you have a strongish case against me. For the first two or three years after I took to racing I had the very worst luck that ever mortal man had; and the consequence was that the governor had to pay up a good lump of money for me which would otherwise have been in your pocket at this moment. That's rough on you, and it isn't fair either. Now I'll tell you what I'll do with you: it isn't much; but I can't see my way to doing more. Mind you, a big rent-roll doesn't always mean a big income, and as far as I can make out I shall have precious little pocket-money left when all expenses are paid. However, I'm ready to make you an allowance of a thousand a year. I won't sign any paper or transfer any capital to you; but a thousand a year you shall have so long as I'm not broke myself; and though you may think a verbal promise ain't worth much, I'm not the sort of chap to go back from my word. Ask anybody you like."

Lord Walter was a little touched and a good deal amused. "My dear fellow," said he, "I know that without requiring anybody else's testimony. But I would rather not be put upon an allowance, thank you. I can live upon what I have of my own; and even if art doesn't bring me in money, I shall take good care that it doesn't ruin me."

"Well," returned Lord Loddondale, with a jerk of his shoulders, "don't say I didn't make you the offer, that's all." He added, after a short pause, "And I shall be quite willing to renew it whenever you please. Of course it isn't for me to dictate especially as you choose to be so independent; but really, you know"—and here he shook his head very seriously—"this sculpture trade isn't at all the sort of thing that's likely to pay. What's the good of making everything in marble? I should have thought terra-cotta would have answered all the purpose."

"You are not exactly the person whom

I should have expected to hear preaching economy," Lord Walter remarked, with a smile.

"You don't know much about me, then; that's all I can say. Nothing venture nothing have, and there's such a thing as being penny wise and pound foolish; but I think a fellow who chucks his money away unnecessarily is an ass. Now really, when you come to consider what the price of marble is——"

Here Lord Loddondale's harangue upon the application of the principles of thrift to art was interrupted by the entrance of his brother's servant, who announced that Mrs. and Miss Wilton and Miss Shafto were in the drawing-room. Thereupon the economist jumped up hastily.

"Women, eh?" said he. "I'm off, then! Don't let them in till I've had time to bolt. Good-bye, Walter. See you again some time or other, I dare say."

It is neither unnatural nor unpardonable on the part of a bachelor marquis with

large estates to be something of a woman-hater, and Lord Loddondale may have had good reasons for shunning the society of ladies. At all events, he always did so if he could. On this occasion he was not pressed to do violence to his inclinations, and Lord Walter, after allowing him a minute to make good his escape, hastened to the drawing-room to welcome his visitors.

Miss Shafto was the first to shake hands with him. "I am afraid," said she, "you must have quite forgotten that you asked us to come to tea to-day. We heard a sound of flying footsteps just now which was painfully suggestive of our having scared some friend of yours out of the house."

"That was only my brother," answered Lord Walter. "He is of a retiring disposition. The tea and muffins will be brought in in a minute to convince you that I hadn't at all forgotten your kind promise."

Then Mrs. Wilton introduced her daughter, who was a very small and very elegantly dressed young lady with large dark eyes. She sat silently in her corner, sipping the cup of tea which was presently handed to her, and when her entertainer exhibited the half-dozen or so of paintings by well-known modern artists and the small but admirable collection of china, bronzes, silver and inlaid work which he had been fortunate enough to put together, found no more pertinent remark to make about them than that they were "very pretty." He concluded that she was rather shy and rather bored, and wondered why she had come.

Norma Shafto was much more appreciative. She could distinguish between old and comparatively modern Satsuma, and knew that one does not pick up a specimen of genuine Luca della Robbia every day. Also she was able to say in what the special merit of this or that picture consisted. Such enlightened criti-

cism being entirely beyond the capacities of either of the other ladies present, Lord Walter and Miss Shafto had the conversation pretty much to themselves.

"Well," said the former at length, "I'm glad you approve of my humble little show; but I suppose that, according to your views, I am neglecting my duty as a good citizen by spending money upon such unproductive objects."

"Are those my views?" she asked. "I didn't know they were. I don't deny that if all these things belonged to me, I should probably sell them and devote the proceeds to charitable purposes; but that is because my hobby doesn't happen to be the same as yours. I dare say a great many good citizens surround themselves with works of art."

Mrs. Wilton observed vaguely that she had read somewhere—she couldn't at the moment recall where—a most interesting paper which showed what nonsense all that wild sort of talk was, you know, and that

the poorer classes wouldn't be in the least benefited, but rather the reverse, if everybody's income were to be expended solely upon the necessaries of life. How this was proved she did not exactly recollect; but it certainly *was* proved, because she had been quite convinced by the reasoning of the writer.

"At any rate," said Norma, "I haven't indulged in any such wild talk, that I know of; so that we shall be able to get on quite comfortably without proofs of its folly. Now, Lord Walter, we want to see your studio, please."

She had an easy, unembarrassed way with her which he was not quite certain whether he liked or not. However, he was as yet scarcely conscious of desiring anything more than a perfectly frank and unbiased expression of Miss Shafto's opinion upon Elizabeth of Hungary; and this he obtained the moment that he asked for it. The leg which Lord Loddondale had pronounced to be unsound did not

attract her notice; but she fastened unhesitatingly upon another and perhaps a more serious defect.

"I think," she said, "that you have made your saint too self-complacent. She looks as though she had just performed a successful conjuring-trick. Surely, if one had fully intended to tell a lie and had found one's lie miraculously converted into the truth, one would be a little bit startled and dismayed."

Lord Walter laughed, though he was secretly mortified. "Evidently," said he, "this work of art is like Dr. Johnson's leg of mutton; it hasn't a single redeeming point. It is bad in conception, bad in execution, bad all through and all over. One consolation is that I don't feel tempted to try and make it better. I must give Queen Elizabeth of Hungary up and attempt to portray somebody else."

"That would be the best plan, I should think," agreed Norma, a little unfeelingly.

But Miss Wilton exclaimed, "Oh, what

a pity!" and added, with a sympathetic sigh, "It must be so awfully difficult to hit upon a fresh idea!"

"It isn't easy," observed Lord Walter; "but perhaps it is even less so to carry it out when you have hit upon it."

"And do you really *like* cudgelling your brains in this way? I can't understand how anybody can enjoy taking unnecessary trouble."

Mrs. Wilton and Miss Shafto had moved away a few paces and were examining some bas-reliefs. Lord Walter looked down at the pretty, childish face which was turned up to his and noticed for the first time how very pretty it was—the exquisite clearness of the complexion, the soft brown eyes, the curling lashes, and the perfectly formed little mouth. It was scarcely worth while to explain to such a baby why unnecessary trouble is often enjoyable or why the trouble which he gave himself could not be described as coming under that head. He responded

smilingly with a counter-question. "Do you like being idle?"

"I don't like having nothing to do," she answered, "but when I do anything, I prefer it to be something pleasant and amusing. After all, one has so few years to amuse one's self in!"

"I hope you are amusing yourself now," said Lord Walter. "I don't mean at this moment; that would be too much to expect. But I hope you find a London season tolerably amusing. It is your first, isn't it?"

The girl nodded. "And likely to be my last, I'm afraid. We are mere country bumpkins, and we can't stand ourselves these luxuries every year. Yes; I find it tolerably amusing—just tolerably. If one could do as one liked it would be delightful; but then one can't."

"At least," observed Lord Walter, "you seem to be able to avoid doing things that you don't like. Upon two separate occasions I have heard Mrs. Wilton lamenting that

she had to go to a party without you, because you had declined to accompany her."

Miss Wilton displayed a row of very white teeth. "I don't know about the first time," she said; "the second time, I suppose, was at the Shaftos' the other night. Well, I had a chance of going to the theatre instead, and it wasn't likely—was it now?—that I should prefer dining with the Shaftos to going to the theatre."

"I dare say not: tastes differ. You are very fond of the theatre then?"

"I simply adore it. Next to dancing with the people whom I wish to dance with—which I am very seldom allowed to do—I enjoy going to the theatre beyond everything else in the world. Unluckily, it sends mamma to sleep."

To do a good-natured thing and to gratify your own inclinations at one and the same time is a rare and precious privilege. Lord Walter thought he saw his way to it. "Couldn't we make up a

party to go to the play some evening?" he suggested. "If your mother didn't care about it, perhaps Mr. Shafto would chaperon you. And Miss Shafto—is she fond of theatres too?"

Miss Wilton laughed and shook her head. "Norma isn't really fond of anything except slums and tatterdemalions," she answered; "but she is such a good old thing that she will always do what she is asked to do. Would you yourself like to come with us?"

This innocent question was accompanied by a sudden upward glance which would doubtless have caused the heart of a susceptible man to flutter. Lord Walter's heart may have been as proof against such assaults as he believed it to be; but he certainly thought Miss Wilton a very charming little person, and his assurance that he should like it of all things was as sincere as it was emphatic.

To prove how sincere he was, he lost no time in broaching his proposition to Miss

Shafto, who laughed and glanced at Madge and assented. Mrs. Wilton, too, disappointed expectation by taking it for granted that she was to be of the party.

"And I dare say Sir Christopher Shearman would come," she added. "That would make six, you know, which would be just right."

"Yes; that would make six," agreed Norma a little doubtfully. "Anyhow," she continued, disregarding a grimace from Madge, "we can ask him. The best way would be for you all to come and dine with us, when we have decided upon the piece and the date."

Lord Walter was strongly of opinion that both those points should be settled then and there; and, notwithstanding some opposition from Mrs. Wilton, who thought Sir Christopher ought to be consulted, he carried his motion by a majority of three to one. Nor did the selection of the piece present any greater difficulties, three out of the conclave of four being absolutely

indifferent, while the remaining one frankly avowed a preference for burlesque.

"It is vulgar of me, I know," Miss Wilton said, with a little appealing side-glance at Lord Walter. Then she turned to her mother and added demurely, "I am in good company, though; for Sir Christopher told me the other day that he had been six times to the Frivolity in the last month and was quite ready to go again."

When the ladies had taken their leave Lord Walter sat down and smoked a pipe and thought them over. He was a reflective young man; and his reflections were sometimes sensible and sometimes ridiculous, like those of the rest of us. "Those two girls," he mused, "make up a sort of epitome of Woman between them. One has the defects of her noble qualities, and the other has—well, I suppose she has the fascinations that belong to her defects."

Now, whether this analysis came under the head of sensible or ridiculous, the sequel will show in good time; but at all

events it seems clear that a man capable of making it could hardly have been upon the point of falling in love with either of its subjects. Yet that was just what Lord Walter felt by no means certain about.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. WILTON'S NERVES ARE SHAKEN.

At six o'clock on the following afternoon Miss Wilton went to tea with her friend Norma Shafto, and in the course of conversation inquired casually—

"Do you suppose that Lord Walter Sinclair works all day in that dismal studio of his in order to make his living, or is it only that he pines for celebrity?"

"Most likely he works for both reasons," answered Norma. "He told me that he wasn't well off."

"Poor fellow, what a pity! I thought he seemed so nice. Decidedly handsome, too."

"He is very nice and very handsome,

and he isn't nearly poor enough to be pitied. In fact, if I were a man, I should be inclined to envy him."

"His good looks, you mean? There isn't much to envy in his talent; or at all events you didn't seem to think so. How could you be so down upon that unlucky clay figure of his! He tried to look as if he didn't mind; but he wasn't particularly successful, and I would have given anything to be able to breathe a word of comfort to him. Unfortunately that was out of the question, because I know nothing about statues, and they don't interest me a bit. I prefer flesh and blood."

Norma looked distressed. "Was I rude?" she asked. "I am so sorry; I only said what I thought."

"But that was the worst of it."

"I am very sorry," repeated Norma. "I suppose if one can't be flattering one ought to hold one's tongue; only I never imagined that he would be hurt by hearing the opinion of an ignoramus. It is hardly

the sort of offence that can be apologized for, either."

"Never mind," said Madge, with a slight smile; "I dare say he will forgive you, even without an apology. And in future you may remember that the opinion of certain ignoramuses is of immense importance to certain artists."

She rose as she spoke, and, bending down to set her empty cup upon the tea-table, gazed steadily for a moment into her friend's face.

"Norma, my dear," said she, "do you know that you are blushing? This is most remarkable; for I don't recollect that I ever before in my life saw you blush. I shall make a note of it in my diary. 'On a certain day and at a certain hour Norma Shafto turned as red as a turkey-cock on being told that her good opinion was valued by Lord Walter Sinclair.' A year hence that entry may have become full of interest. I'm sorry he isn't rich; but then you aren't poor, so it doesn't so much signify."

Kind-hearted people are not always good-humoured; but Norma Shafto was both. It was quite true that she was blushing, and she was annoyed with herself for being so silly as to blush in that causeless way; yet she did not vent her annoyance upon the indiscreet Madge.

"I am not guilty, whatever I may look," she declared, laughing. "I like Lord Walter very much, and I used to know him years ago, when he was a boy; but we are scarcely more than acquaintances now."

"Of course that's what anybody would say under the circumstances."

"It is the truth, anyhow."

"Quite sure?"

"Perfectly sure."

"Then," said Madge deliberately, "I rather think I will take him up myself. I wouldn't for the world interfere with you in any way; but if you don't put in a prior claim, it might perhaps be amusing to try and find out whether he is really as

impassive as he looks. Would he respond to one's modest advances, do you think?"

This speech seemed to displease Norma a good deal more than the previous insinuation with regard to herself had done. She knitted her brows and said, "I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Madge! Any stranger who heard you would think you were a horrid girl, and I don't like it even when we are alone."

"I knew you wouldn't like it," returned the other, laughing, "and that was partly why I said it. Dear old Norma! I believe you really do think it quite wicked to flirt. But I really don't, you see—I don't see the slightest harm in it. And I think I may safely promise neither to break Lord Walter's heart nor my own."

"You may be able to answer for your own; I don't see how you can answer for his. Besides, what about Sir Christopher?"

"Oh, bother Sir Christopher! Please to bear in mind that I'm not engaged to Sir Christopher. And if I were, I should

flirt all the more while my liberty lasted, because it would be wholesome discipline for him."

Norma shook her head and sighed. "I can't understand the pleasure of behaving in that way," said she. "To say the least of it, it is unladylike and—and undignified."

Madge burst out laughing: she had a very pretty, childish sort of laugh. "Now really, Norma," she exclaimed, "you don't, I hope, expect me to be dignified. But I'll try to conduct myself like a lady; and I was only talking nonsense, and I shall marry Sir Christopher in due season, because I shall be made to marry him; and then you may be sure that there will be an end of all friskiness and naughtiness and amusement at once and for ever."

"You can't be made to marry Sir Christopher against your will," observed Norma, who did not look satisfied by this reassuring announcement.

"Can't I, though! My dearest Norma, you have been deprived of that inestimable

blessing, a fond mother; so you don't know what people may not be made to do. Added to which, I won't swear that it would be against my will. When all is said in disparagement of Sir Christopher that can be said—and that is a good deal, Heaven knows!—the fact remains that he is immensely rich."

She began to draw on her gloves, smiling at her friend's grave face. It was not easy for a girl of Norma's direct and honest nature to understand this capricious, inconsistent little being, who sometimes talked like a child and sometimes like a hardened woman of the world. She could only account for such speeches as the above by assuming that Madge did not really mean what she said. As a matter of fact, Madge meant what she said quite as much and quite as often as other people. What was doubtless a little perplexing to the observer was that her sentiments varied with her moods, which in their turn were many and diverse.

It was, for example, a very different young person from the Madge just described who demurely followed Mrs. Wilton into that same drawing-room a few evenings later. Innocence, simplicity, and a not unbecoming timidity were expressed in her features and demeanour; she was dressed all in white, and looked, upon the whole, rather more as though she contemplated attending an improving lecture for the young than a burlesque. Mr. Shafto, to whom the study of her character had never presented any difficulties and who had a paternal sort of affection for her, held her by the hand while he welcomed her in the style which old gentlemen are apt to affect in addressing little girls in their teens.

"Well, Miss Madge," said he, "I hear you are in a fair way to become a confirmed playgoer. So was I once upon a time; but that's a great many years ago, and I'm afraid I've lost the taste for it. However, we old folks can enjoy seeing

the young ones enjoy themselves, can't we, Mrs. Wilton?"

Mrs. Wilton, who perhaps did not quite like being classed among the old folks, replied rather crossly, "I should enjoy going to the theatre as much as anybody if it didn't always give me a headache. Have you heard from Sir Christopher?"

"Oh, yes; he's coming, and so is young Sinclair. They'll be here in a few minutes, I dare say."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the two men made their appearance, having encountered one another upon the stairs; and perhaps, as they advanced, there was nobody in the room who did not, voluntarily or involuntarily, draw a comparison between them, which could not but be to the advantage of the younger. Setting aside the question of personal beauty, Lord Walter always looked like a gentleman, whereas poor Sir Christopher was essentially and unmistakably plebeian. Sir Christopher, however, was in a good

humour; and when he was in a good humour he had the appearance of being a hearty, jolly sort of little man.

After he had shaken hands with everybody, he made straight for Miss Wilton; and Lord Walter, who was watching him with some curiosity, noticed that she received him with an encouraging smile. For some reason or other which he did not trouble himself to examine into, Lord Walter was rather sorry to see this; but, after all, it was no business of his, nor had he any cause to feel dissatisfied with his own lot when he found himself placed at the dinner-table between Miss Shafto and Mrs. Wilton. The former took an early opportunity of begging him to excuse the too free way in which she had criticised his handiwork on the occasion of their last meeting.

"You must have thought me impertinent," she said; "but you did ask me for my opinion, you know; and I gave it, just as I should give my opinion of a Rubens or a Holbein, if I were asked for

it. One may express one's opinion without meaning to imply that it is of the smallest consequence to anybody."

"I was very glad to have your opinion, and I shouldn't have cared to have any opinion but an honest one," answered Lord Walter. "You might have been mistaken, of course; but you were not mistaken. You will be relieved to hear that Elizabeth of Hungary has been reduced to her original elements. Perhaps Mrs. Lämmergeier is right, and I should do well to turn my attention to executing busts of living celebrities. Would Sir Christopher Shearman give me an order, do you think?"

"I doubt it. Nobody can want to have a bust of himself, and——"

"And nobody could want to have a bust of Sir Christopher," suggested Lord Walter, finishing the sentence for her. "Possibly not just at present; but times may change. Has he decided to take Brampton Priory?"

A slight cloud passed over Norma's face,

but she answered cheerfully, "Yes; he has taken the place, and I am very glad of it. It will make papa feel much easier, and I think he is as good a tenant as we could expect to find."

"He has the means of paying his rent, by all accounts. And when Miss Wilton becomes Lady Shearman will she look after your poor people?"

It so happened that Norma had some private misgivings upon that point; but to these she refrained from giving utterance, merely observing that Madge was not Lady Shearman yet.

"But she will be?" he persisted.

"I don't know. Very likely she herself doesn't know."

"She will be extremely foolish if she refuses him: millionaires don't grow on every bush."

But Norma was evidently not much inclined to discuss her friend; and after a few more leading observations which met with no response, he ceased to speculate

about Madge and her destinies, and devoted himself to a study nearer at hand, which was surely a more interesting one. Pretty little selfish girls can hardly be accounted rare specimens of humanity: what is really rare is to find a young, beautiful, and attractive woman, whose notion of happiness is to make others happy; and although some of Miss Shafto's methods of achieving this end seemed to him unlikely to meet with any success worth speaking of, he admired a faith and enthusiasm which he was not able to share.

"My daughter," said Mr. Shafto, passing the claret to Sir Christopher, after the ladies had left the room, "will be sure to recommend lots of her *protégés* round about Brampton to your notice; but you mustn't take what she says too literally. Norma has a craze upon subjects of that kind. I don't mean to say that the agricultural labourer isn't badly enough off; but whether you or she or anybody else can make him better off is another question."

Sir Christopher observed that in nine cases out of ten a man who was badly off had only himself to thank for it; but to this general proposition Mr. Shafto demurred.

"Well, I don't know about that," said he. "I'm badly off; but I don't see how I am to blame for the fall in the value of land."

"Of course not," agreed Sir Christopher; "but then you've done the sensible thing by letting your place."

"I think so," said Mr. Shafto; "I think it was the sensible thing to do."

And then he went on, in his usual communicative way, to relate how he had already augmented his modest fortune by following the advice of his friend Baron Lämmergeier, "a shrewd fellow and a first-rate man of business." He was still enlarging upon this topic, Sir Christopher listening to him with a somewhat sceptical smile, when the butler came in to announce that the carriage was at the door and that the ladies were waiting.

There was a brief discussion in the hall as to how the party should divide itself; but, whatever the wishes of some members of it may have been, the question hardly admitted of any other solution than that which was adopted. Mr. Shafto's carriage bore away that gentleman and the three ladies, while the two bachelors followed in a hansom, deriving such consolation as they might from tobacco. Lord Walter had nothing to say to his companion, who, for that matter, did not feel called upon to make conversation for his benefit; so the two men smoked their cigarettes and maintained an unbroken silence while they were whirled along Piccadilly and Pall Mall. It was not until they reached the Strand that an incident occurred which caused each of them to forget his determination to ignore the other.

The Strand was thronged, as it always is at that hour of the evening; a steady stream was setting in both directions; but the majority of the carriages, having de-

posited their occupants at the various theatres, were returning westwards; and one of them, wheeling round somewhat too suddenly, came into violent collision with Mr. Shafto's landau. The wheels became locked, the horses began plunging, and to the two spectators in the rear it looked as though the time had come to rescue the ladies from a position of some possible danger.

"By George, they'll be over in another minute!" exclaimed Sir Christopher, throwing open the doors of the hansom and jumping out.

He was followed at once by Lord Walter; but if their intention was to hold up Mr. Shafto's swaying equipage until the ladies should have been got out of it, they were a little bit too late. The carriage stood upon two wheels for a second and then slowly turned over on its side with a crash and an unpleasant sound of breaking glass.

Of course a crowd immediately collected; two policemen appeared upon the scene,

and the cause of the disaster was provisionally arrested, loudly protesting his absolute innocence; but neither Lord Walter nor Sir Christopher paid any heed to these details. Their business was to extricate their hapless friends; and perhaps no one who has not tried it would believe how difficult it is to haul four people out of an overturned carriage. However, the task was accomplished. First Mr. Shafto, then Madge, and then Norma were helped to scramble through the open door; and a great relief it was to the rescuers to hear that none of them were hurt.

Then from the dark interior issued forth a lamentable voice, which said, "I am not killed; but I am horribly bruised, and Mr. Shafto has been standing on my head for five minutes."

"I give you my word of honour," exclaimed poor Mr. Shafto, aghast, "that I did nothing of the sort. Good heavens, what a thing to say! I assure you I was most careful——"

But nobody took any notice of his asseverations, except Norma, who patted him on the shoulder and consoled him, and presently Mrs. Wilton was lifted out on to the pavement, somewhat dishevelled and much agitated, but apparently not otherwise the worse for her adventure. As the whole party were within a few yards of the Frivolity Theatre, whither they had been bound, it seemed best to adjourn thither and ascertain the extent of the damage sustained; and this proved to be so trifling that Madge, for one, declared herself quite ready to go in and witness the performance. But Mrs. Wilton, for whom a chair had been brought, would not hear of such a thing. Nobody but Madge, she said, would have been unfeeling enough to propose it. Perhaps somebody would be so good as to call a cab for her.

Norma, seeing a suspicion of tears in Madge's eyes, came to the rescue. "If one of the gentlemen would take Mrs. Wilton home," she suggested, "the rest of us

might as well see the play, since we are here."

Lord Walter had a moment of apprehension, which however was alleviated by the considerate action of Mr. Shafto.

"I'll take you home, Mrs. Wilton," said the old gentleman. "I really didn't stand on your head, you know; but never mind that. I'll see that you're made comfortable, and then I can come back and join the young ones."

So Mr. Shafto and Mrs. Wilton drove off in a four-wheeled cab together; and Norma and Madge took their places in the stalls, attended by their two cavaliers and unaccompanied by any vestige of a chaperon.

"What fun!" whispered the latter to the former. "If anybody sees us, we shall get a nice character, shan't we?"

"I didn't think of that," answered Norma a little anxiously. "Fortunately, papa will be here before very long."

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE PLAY.

Sir Christopher marched into the theatre first, bearing the tickets; Madge followed him; then came Lord Walter, and then Norma. It was doubtless due to the latter's desire to make everybody comfortable that this order of precedence was observed, and although it might have been more prudent to allow Lord Walter to bring up the rear, she may be excused for having neglected a precaution which, under all the circumstances, seemed to be superfluous. Throughout the evening Madge had behaved as well as possible; with Sir Christopher she had been amiability itself; she had taken no notice at all of the handsome young sculptor, and it was surely

improbable that she would begin flirting with him now that her legitimate suitor was seated so close to her.

Madge Wilton, however, was given to the doing of improbable things. No sooner had she taken her place than she put up a large fan, and, under cover of that shield, bent her pretty little head sideways towards her right-hand neighbour. The orchestra was in full blast, so that Sir Christopher could not catch what she said; though this was not from any lack of effort on his part to do so. After all, her speech, if he had heard it, was not one to which he could very reasonably have objected.

"Have you got such a thing as a spare pocket-handkerchief about you?" she whispered. "I didn't want to mention it while mamma was there, or she would have insisted upon my going home with her, but I cut my arm when the carriage was upset, and it won't stop bleeding."

She drew aside the wrap which she had

kept over her right arm, and displayed, just above the wrist, a blood-stained bandage formed out of one of those absurd combinations of cambric and lace upon which ladies are supposed to be able to blow their noses after a certain hour of the evening. Whether or not it could ever have been used for such a purpose, it was manifestly insufficient for that to which it had now been put, and the satin lining of Miss Wilton's dolman had suffered.

Lord Walter was much distressed, and was also filled with admiration for the courage of the sufferer. "How plucky of you to keep quiet!" he exclaimed. "My handkerchief is very much at your service, of course; but really I think you had better go home. You can come and see this stupid piece any evening, and you ought to have that cut seen to. There may be some broken glass in it."

"Oh no, there isn't, and if there is, I can wash it out before I go to bed. Please don't make a fuss, or we shall have

Sir Christopher jumping up and asking whether there is a surgeon in the audience. If you can stop the bleeding I shall be all right."

She delivered over her injured arm to him as she spoke, and he was soon able to satisfy himself that the wound was not a serious one. Sir Christopher, on the other side of the fan, could not see what was taking place; but Norma, of course, did, and would have made some remark, had she not been checked by an imploring grimace from Madge. Lord Walter drew a knife, containing a pair of scissors, from his pocket, and with these he proceeded as noiselessly as possible to cut his handkerchief into strips, which he folded tightly round the white arm abandoned to him. It took him some little time to do this, because bandaging is a scientific operation upon which great care ought always to be bestowed; and besides, he did not quite know how to finish off his handiwork until Norma handed him a pin.

Meanwhile the curtain had risen, and the whole attention of the patient was concentrated upon the stage, where a bevy of scantily arrayed shepherdesses were skipping about in time to a chorus sung by an equal number of knock-kneed shepherds. She appeared to be quite oblivious of her neighbour, and did not distract him from his duties by answering when he asked her whether he was hurting her. And how could a sculptor and anatomist help noticing the perfect outline and moulding of the arm which had been entrusted to him and the smoothness and whiteness of the skin? And if he lingered more than he need have done over his simple task, and if, when he was obliged to acknowledge it finished, he was conscious of a certain disturbance of his mental balance, that was nothing more than might have been foreseen.

It was, at all events, understood by Norma Shafto, who sighed and looked away and tried to interest herself in the

gambols of the actors. Norma, knowing very well what it all meant, was provoked and rather impatient, for once, with Madge, whose manœuvres struck her as being both transparent and uncalled for. What was the good of it? she wondered. If any amateur surgery was required, it would have been so simple to apply to Sir Christopher! What pleasure could any girl find in laying siege to the heart of a man whom she had no intention of marrying? Probably Madge could not have answered the question; but to the fact that there *was* a pleasure in so doing she could have testified with all the certainty engendered by repeated personal experience. The genuine flirt, like the true poet, is born, not made, and although, by dint of painstaking perseverance, a good many ladies contrive to acquire the art after a fashion, they seldom attain to such proficiency in it as Madge Wilton possessed.

That unscrupulous young woman, on being informed that the binding up of her

wound was completed, only whispered, "Thank you so much!"—which, to be sure, was not a great deal to say; but she accompanied this acknowledgment of the service rendered to her by a glance which, half-timid though it was, was extremely expressive; and the simple truth is that, during the remainder of the first act, Lord Walter's mind was chiefly busied with conjectures as to what it expressed. She neither spoke to him nor looked at him again until the curtain fell; to Sir Christopher's frequent remarks she responded only by a nod or a murmur; it was scarcely possible to doubt that she was enjoying herself as much as a schoolboy at a pantomime, and if she was aware that Lord Walter was admiringly studying her profile, she did not seem to be aware of it. But as soon as she was released from the spell cast over her by the play and the players, she allowed him to have a view of her full face and showed every disposition to converse.

"Isn't it delightful!" she exclaimed.

"Is it?" he returned, laughing. "Yes; it's delightful if you think so. Everything is what we think it is."

"But don't *you* think so?" she asked. "I suppose you don't; but I wish you did! One feels as if one ought to be ashamed of liking things which other people find a bore."

"As far as that goes, the other people ought to be ashamed of being bored, perhaps. Not that I am bored. I don't particularly care about the piece to-night, because I never care much for burlesques and I have seen this one before; but if it makes you more comfortable to know that your neighbours are happy, you can set your mind at ease so far as one of them is concerned."

"I cannot understand why you should be happy, sitting in a hot theatre and looking on at a play which doesn't amuse you," said Madge, gravely.

"Can't you?" he returned. "Then I'm afraid I can't explain."

After which their eyes met and they both laughed.

All this Norma saw and heard. Also, by bending forward a little, she could see that Sir Christopher was beginning to look ominously sulky, and it crossed her mind that she had exercised a somewhat mistaken benevolence in removing Madge from her mother's supervision. "I wonder," she thought, "whether we might not effect a change of places when papa comes. I wish he would come!"

At this moment somebody who was not Mr. Shafto made his way along the row of stalls and seated himself in the unoccupied one by Norma's elbow. The new-comer was a lank and sallow young man. His black hair, which was thick and curly and which he wore somewhat longer than is customary in these days, was brushed back behind a pair of prominent ears; he was clean-shaven, and, being of so dark a complexion, had a bluish tinge about that part of his face where his beard ought to have

been. His admirers, of whom, like everybody else in the world, he possessed a few, said that he had fine eyes. He had, besides, a nose of noble dimensions and a good many square inches of forehead. His mouth was large and his lips were full; as for his chin, it was going to be a double one before long, but was as yet in an early stage of development.

He said, in a deliberate, low-pitched voice—a voice which anybody would have sworn to in the dark as belonging to a perfectly self-satisfied being—

"How do you do, Miss Shafto? I saw you from afar and came to pay my respects. I didn't expect to find you patronizing burlesque."

"How do you do, Mr. Morley?" returned Norma. "I might say the same thing of you, might I not? Surely your contempt for this sort of thing must be more profound than mine."

"As a dramatic representation," answered Mr. Morley placidly, "it is, of course,

beneath contempt; but the whole scene is in a manner instructive, and the mere fact of the theatre being crowded is typical of modern life under one of its aspects. I feel bound to study all the aspects of modern life."

"Do you?" said Norma. "Why?"

Now this was rather an unkind speech to make, and it was not at all like Norma Shafto to make it. All that can be pleaded on her behalf is that asses are more irritating at some moments than at others.

Mr. Morley looked surprised and a trifle pained. "I thought you knew," said he, "that I dabble a little in literature. As a contributor to certain reviews, and as a humble student of the world and of men, I am often compelled to look on at what to me personally is distasteful."

"To which of the reviews do you contribute?"

"I must ask you," returned Mr. Morley, with a smile, "to excuse me from answering that question. Hitherto I have pre-

ferred to preserve my incognito, and perhaps for the present I had better continue to do so."

An unfriendly critic might have surmised that if Mr. Morley had been on the staff of any review of the first class, he would have displayed less modesty; but Norma was not unfriendly; she was only disinclined to be bothered with this country neighbour, whom she had not anticipated meeting in London.

"Are you up in town for any time?" she asked presently. "I hope you left your mother quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you. I am up for the season, like other people: one is more or less obliged to do as other people do. Isn't that Miss Wilton?"

He bent forward and bowed to Madge, who acknowledged his salutation by a very slight bend of the head and went on talking to Lord Walter. Perhaps it may have been this insufficient recognition that caused Mr. Morley to remark—

"I hear that poor little girl is to be married to your new tenant, Sir Christopher Shearman, who, I see, is sitting beyond her. It seems a melancholy fate; but I suppose we most of us get the fate that we deserve."

"You must have been misinformed," said Norma; "Madge is not engaged to Sir Christopher. When she is, it will be time enough for you to begin pitying her—though I don't know why you should."

The young man with the curly black hair was not easily snubbed. He said, "My dear Miss Shafto, whenever I think of you I think of Wordsworth's

> 'Perfect woman, nobly plann'd,
> To warn, to comfort and command;
> And yet a spirit still, and bright
> With something of an angel-light.'

Being what you are, you naturally and inevitably see what is good in others and are slow to detect what is evil; but I should think that even you would be

puzzled to point out much good in Sir Christopher Shearman."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is the truth. He shoots, he hunts, he eats and drinks—is there anything more to be said about him? I can't tell you how grieved I was when I heard that he was to replace you at Brampton."

"At any rate, he is a man," returned Norma, who was unusually exasperated.

But she might as well have attempted to kill an alligator with a pea-shooter as to disconcert her companion. Mr. Morley rejoined placidly, "I believe he is a good shot, if that is what you mean; but we do not belong to a community of savages. In our day and in our country a man must possess higher qualifications than those of a North American Indian before he can be called truly manly."

In our day and in our country there are a good many men who cannot possibly be so described, if tried by any conceivable test, and Mr. Basil Morley was one of

these. Nevertheless, Norma had a sneaking kindness for the poor creature. She knew that he was good to his old mother, with whom he lived; he had helped her, too, in providing material comforts for her sick people, and had generously refrained from disturbing their faith in the creed of Christianity, which he himself had outgrown. Moreover, almost everybody detested him; and that in itself constituted a sort of claim upon her indulgence. So, as Mr. Shafto had not appeared when the curtain rose again, she endured his company throughout the second act and submitted with a good grace to the trite reflections with which it pleased him to favour her from time to time.

What may have helped her to be tolerant was that her attention was really engaged elsewhere. Lord Walter and Madge Wilton continued to whisper together, notwithstanding the highly entertaining spectacle which was provided for them upon the stage; nor could there be any question

as to the effect produced by their conduct upon the gentleman of whom Mr. Morley had spoken so disparagingly. Immediately upon the conclusion of the second act Sir Christopher charged out, muttering something, as he passed, about smoking a cigarette outside and having had enough of this rot; and hardly had he vanished when Mr. Shafto entered.

Mr. Shafto, as his habit was, affected to have arrived in breathless haste. "Sorry to have been so long," he said; "but I had to take Mrs. Wilton home and see that she had a glass of wine, and then I thought I might as well find out whether the horses or John had been damaged. John tumbled off the box and declares he is badly shaken; but he doesn't look much the worse. Hullo, Morley! Attracted up to the metropolis, like the rest of the unemployed, eh?"

"I am seldom at a loss for employment," replied Mr. Morley, with a superior sort of smile; "but a change of scene is some-

times desirable, I think. I am afraid I am occupying your place."

"Not at all, my dear fellow; I don't want to sit beside my own daughter, thank you; I can do that at home. Stay where you are, and I'll go and talk to my friend Miss Madge."

Thus it came to pass that when, at the expiration of a few minutes, Sir Christopher returned, Mr. Morley had to retire. Before saying good night, however, he took Norma's address and was so kind as to say that he would look in upon her some day soon.

Sir Christopher, who was in a very naughty temper, plumped down into the vacated stall, and said gruffly, "Who's that puppy?"

"You will find out before you have been at Brampton long," answered Norma. "In our part of the world Mr. Morley represents Intellect. The rest of us haven't very much to boast of in that way; so that we are naturally proud of him,

although we think he gives himself undue airs."

"The airs are evident enough," growled Sir Christopher. "Does one have to be acquainted with him long to discover the intellect?"

"Oh, not very long, as a rule. If he himself doesn't tell you what services he has rendered to contemporary literature, his mother will. I shall be curious to hear what you think of your neighbours. You will like most of them, I hope; but there are some oddities among them."

If Miss Shafto thought that she was going to steer clear of dangerous topics in this way she did not know her man. Out of the fulness of Sir Christopher's heart his mouth always spoke, and his heart just now was full of indignation against Madge Wilton. "What a flirt that girl is?" he exclaimed abruptly. "I hate flirts."

"I don't think you hate Madge, do you?" asked Norma gently. "If you do, you must be rather unjust and rather un-

reasonable. She talked to you all through dinner: if she had talked to nobody else for the rest of the evening, perhaps Lord Walter might have called her a flirt."

"She didn't flirt with me, and she is flirting with him," declared Sir Christopher doggedly. "Pray don't suppose that I am making any complaint; she is at liberty to please herself. All I say is that I hate a flirt, and I presume I've a right to my own taste."

There was no disputing that; and Norma quite understood the implied threat. The only question was whether it was worth while to stroke this bear down. Upon the whole, she believed that it was; so, while the play was being brought to an end, she exerted herself with that intention, and was moderately successful. Sir Christopher, when he said good night to the ladies at the door of the theatre, was not without hope that Madge's behaviour might be explained by an hypothesis rather

flattering than otherwise to his self-esteem. He had not declared himself yet, and of course it was conceivable that she might wish to make him declare himself; and some colour was lent to this pleasing surmise by the manner in which she took leave of him.

"Still cross?" she whispered, as she gave him her hand, and then, without waiting for an answer, withdrew into the recesses of the cab which Mr. Shafto had called.

But Lord Walter, as Madge may have been aware, did not hear these last words, being occupied at the moment in telling Norma how much he had enjoyed his evening.

CHAPTER VII.

NORMA HAS A BAD TIME OF IT.

It was discovered a very long time ago that misfortunes never come singly; and when Norma Shafto found out, on the morning after her visit to the theatre, that she had lost a valuable old fan to which she was much attached, she felt pretty sure that she had an unlucky day before her. It is true that she had got out of bed in low spirits, which was an unusual thing with her; but whether this circumstance was or was not in any degree accountable for her gloomy anticipations, the latter were speedily verified. No sooner had she entered the breakfast-room than Mr. Shafto bustled in from his study, looking worried

and perturbed, and began to grumble at the food set before him.

"Upon my word, Norma, I think you might see that that woman provides us with something fit to eat! I'm not over-particular, as you know; but I do draw the line at stale fish."

Norma, after apologizing for the fish, which was not stale, rang the bell and ordered something else, though she knew that her father would not eat it when it came. Merely by way of making conversation, she mentioned her loss; whereupon Mr. Shafto declared that it served her right for being so careless of her property.

"I'm not careless of mine, goodness knows!" he observed, scratching his head ruefully; "but I lose it, all the same. From what I hear this morning, I think I may say good-bye to three thousand pounds. This is what comes of trusting to lying prospectuses, you see."

It might have been imagined from his

tone that Norma had been guilty of that foolish credulity; although, as a matter of fact, no one could have had a more holy horror of speculation than she. This was neither the first nor the second time that her father had lost money through trying to gain it, and she knew enough of him to be aware that he was incorrigible. Therefore she wisely abstained from remonstrances which would only have annoyed him; and presently, like the grey-headed child that he was, he remembered having spoken crossly to her and begged her pardon.

"I'm sorry I said the fish was bad; I've no doubt it's all right. But when one has just dropped three thousand pounds, one would swear that a salmon was tainted if one had landed it with one's own rod an hour ago. Well, well! there's no good in crying over spilt milk. I think I'll look up Lämmergeier this morning; if anybody can advise me about what steps to take, he is the man. Don't wait luncheon for

me ; I'll get something to eat in the City."

So Mr. Shafto left the house in a tolerably cheerful frame of mind, notwithstanding the good reasons that he had for considering himself unfortunate. But Norma was not able to shake off her depression so easily. Having pacified the cook, who was naturally indignant at the affront which had been put upon her, she thought she would go and see a few of those excellent people with whom she had lately become associated in works of charity. Possibly she was not in a fit mood for appreciating the excellences and pardoning the deficiencies of her fellow-workers ; but it certainly did seem to her that these good folks were more priggish, more unpractical, and more self-satisfied than usual.

For first of all she had an interview with a certain parson ; and a very worthy and hard-working little parson he was, with a round face and a pair of spectacles, and a scrap of blue ribbon at his button-

hole. Only he was quite sure about everything, as so many of them are, which made him a little irritating at times. Just now he was quite sure that drink is the origin of all evil; and that, after all, is a theory which cannot be made to hold water by the mere fact that its votaries have resolved to swallow nothing stronger. He thought it a sad pity that Norma was still given to the use of intoxicating liquors; he was convinced that she would be a great deal better and happier if she would renounce them and induce those about her to do likewise; and apparently his reason for thinking so was that Tim O'Flaherty had been beating his wife again and was even now answering for his excesses before a police-magistrate.

The little parson was not altogether in the wrong; but he was dictatorial and provoking, and it was easy to foresee that when poor Mrs. O'Flaherty returned from the police-court she would meet with a Job's comforter. Norma asked whether,

under all the circumstances, it would be permissible to leave a small sum of money for the benefit of that injured woman and her children and was somewhat sharply told that she ought to know better than to propose such a thing. Then she received instructions as to the performance of certain tasks which she had undertaken, and went her way.

Her next visit was to a building in the same district which had recently been hired as a Hall of Recreation for the behoof of the inhabitants; and here she found Lady Adelaide Tomkinson, the leader and president of the little society which had taken it in hand. Lady Adelaide, a tall, fair-haired and rather pretty woman, whose style of attire recalled the æsthetic craze of a few years ago, was totting up accounts with the manager of the establishment, and frankly admitted that she had got them into a hopeless tangle.

"One thing, however," said she, pushing her books away with a sigh, "is quite

clear, and that is that we are not paying our way. We have ceased to be a novelty, and we don't seem to be a success. You were not at the concert here last night, were you, Miss Shafto?"

"No," answered Norma; "I was at the theatre."

"I don't think one should take up a work of this kind," said Lady Adelaide rather severely, "unless one is prepared to make some sacrifices in order to support it. Naturally the people won't come to entertainments which we don't think good enough to patronize ourselves."

"Were you here last night?" Norma ventured to inquire.

"It was quite impossible for me to be here. Mr. Tomkinson had asked some political people to dinner and I was obliged to entertain them. A married woman, of course, has home duties which she can't neglect, and which are by no means always pleasures, I can assure you. Please don't think that I mean to scold

you, Miss Shafto; only it seems that none of us were here last night except the performers, and you can understand how discouraging that must be to the audience."

Lady Adelaide added, as she rose—"Since you have come, Miss Shafto, it would be very kind of you if you would go through these accounts. I never had any head for figures, and I must be at home before luncheon-time."

So Norma spent half an hour in auditing and correcting Lady Adelaide's sums in addition, and, as the result of her labours, was able to declare a considerable deficit. The manager, a decent, middle-aged man, with an occasional twinkle in the corner of his eye, had not much comfort to offer her.

"You see, m'm," said he, "it takes something powerful in the way of an attraction to compete with beer. Then there's another thing you've got to contend against, and that is that a many of these people is downright 'ungry. Now, there's

a good deal as you and me might enjoy which we couldn't seem to relish upon an empty stomach, do you see, m'm?"

Apparently this observer, who was not without experience, was very much of Lord Walter's opinion. Norma went away with a rather heavy heart. What is to be done with the thousands who are for ever hovering upon the verge of famine? Mansion House Funds, we are told, do them little or no good; to sanction a fictitious demand for labour by means of public works would be to insert the thin end of a very formidable wedge; to raise the moral standard of the masses would be a capital thing; but then nobody seems to know how to set about doing it.

Perhaps the very best plan that a far-sighted philanthropist could suggest would be to put three-fourths of them to death. If that impossible thing could be done, and if equally impossible restrictions could be imposed upon the increase of population, posterity might have some chance. Mean-

while individual effort appears to produce no appreciable fruit, unless indeed it be to the individuals themselves, who, let us hope, reap a reward of some description or other from the seed of their kind intentions.

Norma Shafto was far too sensible to be discouraged by the comparative failure of efforts from which she had never anticipated any triumphant results. If upon this occasion she was disposed to take an unusually pessimistic view of things in general, that was only because, as has been related, things in general were unusually vexatious. She thought them all over after she had gone home and was eating her solitary luncheon; but, oddly enough, she omitted to count among them one thing which in reality annoyed her more than the whole of the others together. She foresaw that trouble would come of Madge's unfortunate determination to flirt with Lord Walter Sinclair; only she said to herself that, after all, it was no business of hers, and that people who have made up

their minds to do foolish things are seldom deterred from their folly by the intervention of outsiders. She had gone upstairs to the drawing-room, and was debating whether she should or should not go and inquire how Mrs. Wilton was after the shock of the previous evening, when a visitor was announced.

Mr. Morley followed his name into the room very languidly. He had a way of entering a room which of itself would have sufficed to prejudice any unprejudiced person against him; but it must be assumed that he was not aware of this. When he had seated himself in the most comfortable chair that he could find, he said, with a slow, exasperating smile, "Miss Shafto, I must plead guilty to an act of petty larceny." He drew Norma's missing fan from his pocket, and held it up. "Last night," he continued, "I could not resist the temptation to appropriate some trifle of yours, which I might take home with me and which would breathe to me of you;

but when I examined this fan by daylight and perceived its intrinsic value—perhaps you don't know how really valuable it is?—I felt that I must restore it to its owner; and so here I am. Will you forgive me?"

"Since you have brought it back, I will forgive you, Mr. Morley," answered Norma, half amused, half indignant; "but I hope you will not behave in such an idiotic way again. That fan belonged to my grandmother, and I know its value as well as you do. I have already sent to the theatre to inquire about it, and I have put an advertisement in the papers; so you see you have caused a great deal of trouble which might have been avoided. Another time, if you want to have anything that will breathe of me to you, perhaps you will kindly mention it, and I will try to oblige you. You might have had the loan of my fan last night for the asking, instead of making a pickpocket of yourself."

She was accustomed to Basil Morley's flowery speeches and thought him a harm-

less sort of fool. That, however, was by no means the view that Mr. Morley took of himself. He was quite certain that he was not a fool, and he would not at all have liked to be stigmatized as harmless.

"Ah," he sighed, "if I had only known that! But I didn't know it, and so I yielded to my wicked inclinations. Well, at any rate my offence has served its purpose; for it has been the means of inspiring me."

"Inspiring you? With what?" inquired Norma, rather imprudently.

"Oh, with a poor enough thing. Sometimes when I am in the mood for it, I knock off a sonnet; but as often as not I burn what I have written. Latterly I have been thinking that I may perhaps bring out a volume of the few which I have kept and which seem to me to have some merit. This one is scarcely worthy of your notice; still, if you really wish to hear it——"

Norma was as innocent of having expressed any such wish as she was of having

experienced it; but she had not the requisite hardness of heart to silence her visitor, who at once produced a sheet of paper, remarking, "I have called it 'To My Lady's Fan.'" Then he cleared his voice and started—

"Oh, call it not a theft that made thee mine!
For thou and I are hers, and she is ours,
And in that fellow-slavery divine
We are each other's. Through the sleepless hours
Of this sweet summer night I'll sing to thee,
And thou——"

Here the poet was suddenly interrupted by a peal of irrepressible laughter.

"I beg your pardon," said Norma, speaking indistinctly from behind the pocket-handkerchief with which she was trying in vain to stifle her merriment; "but I really couldn't help it. When I hear things described I always picture them to myself, and the idea of your sitting up all night, with an open fan before you, and singing to it *was* rather comical, wasn't it? I didn't mean to laugh at the sonnet,

which I am sure is very pretty. Please go on."

But Mr. Morley was not to be appeased. He folded up the paper and put it away, observing coldly, "You will hardly expect me to make myself ridiculous by reading any farther. Whatever the sonnet may have been worth, you have quite destroyed its value in my eyes, and I shall tear it up as soon as I get home. At the same time, I may perhaps be permitted to point out that I made use of the verb to sing in a poetical, not in a musical sense. If it is so very laughable to indite a sonnet to an inanimate object, I have at least the consolation of knowing that greater poets than I have done the same thing and that I am derided in tolerably good company."

To this dignified rebuke Norma returned no immediate reply. When she did speak, it was to say, "I think, if I could write poetry, I wouldn't waste my time in addressing verses to anybody's fan. There are so many other subjects which a man of

genius might take up, and some of them haven't been touched yet."

"Are there?" asked Mr. Morley, somewhat mollified by being called a man of genius. "I should be very glad to hear of them. My own belief is that every conceivable poetical idea has been worn threadbare long ago."

"I was thinking of the poverty and misery of London. A poem which described that might do some good and couldn't very well help being pathetic. But as yet no poet seems to have thought it worth more than a passing allusion."

"Well, we have had 'The Song of the Shirt,' you know. Of course that is not poetry of a high class; still, in its own way, it has a certain value. You, I know, are greatly interested in the unhappy lot of the masses, and whatever interests you interests me. But I must confess that I should have difficulty in writing a poem upon such a theme. All that is squalid and mean and ugly distresses and disgusts

me. I suppose that is the inevitable failing of the poetic temperament."

He looked so blandly self-complacent, he was so perfectly unconscious of his own absurdity, that Norma could not be angry with him. She only remarked, "You might put your distress and disgust into rhyme, might you not? The more strongly you felt them the greater your success would be, I should think."

Mr. Morley smiled. "Ah, but I don't covet success," he rejoined. "When one sees who the successful people are, one really doesn't feel very anxious to be included among them. My ambition is simply to be appreciated by a few—a select few."

Norma was wondering whether it would be very unkind to disappoint him by omitting to ask who the select few might be, when, to her relief, a second visitor was shown into the room.

At the name of "Miss Travers" Mr. Morley made a grimace and heaved an

impatient sigh ; but Norma jumped up and stepped forward with outstretched hands to welcome a lady who was perhaps the most staunch friend that she had in the world.

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD NELL.

Throughout Stourshire, and it might almost be said throughout England, so far as a certain section of society is concerned, Miss Travers was well known and deservedly popular. She rode straight to hounds; she was an admitted authority on the training and treatment of horses and dogs; she had a kindly, honest disposition; she was in the habit of saying what she thought, and she feared neither man nor woman in the world. These attributes, taken in conjunction with the circumstances that she was comfortably off and was a gentlewoman by birth, had earned for her a large circle of friends. "Old Nell," as

she was generally called, was a frequent and welcome guest at country houses; her towering form and her good-humoured, ugly face were to be seen everywhere where smart people are to be seen in London during the early part of the summer, and to frequenters of Newmarket her features were as familiar as those of the stewards of the Jockey Club themselves. The prefix of "old" has, as everybody knows, become more or less a term of endearment. In a literal sense Miss Travers could not be called old, though she was certainly no longer young, being at this time rather over forty years of age. Plain she had always been; and perhaps it was because she was so perfectly well aware of that fact that she did not think it worth while to bestow as much attention upon her personal appearance as women usually do. "I take care to have good boots," she was wont to say, "and I believe my riding-habits fit me pretty well; but as for frocks, I can't bring myself to take

an interest in them. I leave that sort of thing to my maid."

The result of this misplaced confidence was that Miss Travers was often arrayed in a combination of colours which grieved sensitive souls like that of Basil Morley, and that, when in the country, she wore costumes designed rather with a view to comfort and durability than in conformity with the laws of prevailing fashion. For these latter it may be surmised that she herself, not her maid, was responsible. She was in the country, off and on, for three-fourths of the year. She had a small property, inherited from her father, which she managed with dexterity, and even, it was said, with profit, farming a considerable portion of it herself. Her house, which was of moderate size, was large enough to accommodate as many guests as she cared to invite. The extensive stabling which she had added to it had been built under her personal supervision, and was pronounced by competent judges to be in

all respects admirable. Amongst the poor she was considered to be both just and generous, while her richer neighbours had that respect for her which it is natural to feel for those who know exactly what you are worth and treat you accordingly. Miss Travers was strongly of opinion (and she never disguised her opinions) that Norma Shafto was worth all the other inhabitants of Stourshire put together. In Norma she recognized, if not precisely a kindred spirit, yet one whose qualities were such as to command her sympathy and admiration; and it was therefore not surprising that she had heard with consternation that Brampton Priory was about to pass into other hands. Her first words bore reference to this melancholy news.

"My dear creature," she exclaimed, "if you want to see a dejected and disconsolate woman, here you are! I suppose it's no fault of yours; but as for Mr. Shafto, I can't forgive him, and he had better keep out of my reach for some time to come.

As if people had any business to go letting their houses to the first ironmonger that turns up! Not that the case would have been much improved if he had let his house to the Prince of Wales. Brampton ought never to have been let at all, and that's all about it."

"But necessity has no law," observed Norma. "When one can't afford to live at home one must go away, and I think poor papa deserves some credit for putting a good face upon it."

"Anyhow, you don't deserve any for taking his part, because you would do that, whether he was right or wrong. Don't tell me he can't afford to live at home; he could afford it well enough if he chose. I look upon him as a selfish and foolish old man, and I shall tell him so the very first time that I see him."

"I am quite sure you will," said Norma, laughing; "but unfortunately no rude speeches can cancel the lease of Brampton."

"If they could," observed Mr. Morley,

"I should not shrink from uttering a few myself. The end would justify the means."

"Oh, that's you, is it?" said Miss Travers. "I thought I noticed a disagreeable smell of patchouli. How do you do? What has brought you to London?"

"Is not London large enough to hold us both, Miss Travers?" inquired the poet, with an unfriendly sort of smile. "As for patchouli, I may truly say that I have never used such a brutal scent in my life, and that I would die rather than use it."

"Well, I won't swear to its being patchouli; but it's something unpleasant. Pomatum, I dare say. Now that you are in London why don't you take the opportunity to have your hair cut? You have no idea how much more like a respectable being you would look if you were to have that wiry black mat removed from the back of your head."

"Don't you think, Miss Travers," suggested Mr. Morley sweetly, "that we had better steer clear of personal criticism? It

is a game at which two can play, and perhaps, if I were rude enough to do it, I might offer some advice to you which would not be altogether devoid of excuse."

"My good man, you know as well as I do that you would never have the pluck. You are dying to say something rude at the present moment; but you can't get beyond insinuations, you see, and I suspect that your poor little heart is fluttering like a bird's at your audacity in having gone even so far."

"Nell!" remonstrated Norma in a whisper, as Mr. Morley slowly rose and took up his hat.

But Miss Travers only burst out laughing. "Are you going, Mr. Morley?" she asked. "Well, good-bye then, and don't bear malice. I'll take your word for it that you never use patchouli."

Mr. Morley vouchsafed no reply. He bent over Norma's hand with a grace which was all his own, saying, "I hope I may be allowed to come and see you

again, Miss Shafto," and so made for the door.

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Norma, as soon as he was gone; "I don't think you ought to have insulted him as you did, Nell, and now I am afraid he is really offended."

"Oh, he'll be all right," answered Miss Travers easily. "I was obliged to be insulting, or he would never have moved; but I dare say he'll forgive me. At all events, we have got rid of him for the present. How you can tolerate such a degraded wretch I can't conceive."

"I don't dislike him so much as you do," answered Norma. "He is conceited, of course, but one must take into consideration that he is an only child and that his mother has spoilt him."

"My dear Norma, he has been at a public school and at college. I don't see how you can hold poor old Mother Morley responsible for anything except having brought him into the world. However, he

isn't worth talking about; I'd rather talk about you. Are you going to live in London? What does your father mean to do?"

"He hasn't said much about it as yet," answered Norma; "but most likely we shall establish ourselves here. We can have a lease of this house, I believe, and papa always seems to be able to find occupation in London. He is a good deal at his club; and then there is the City, where he goes to meet his friend Baron Lämmergeier, and makes money—or loses it."

Miss Travers shook her head. "He's a great deal more likely to lose money than make it if he trusts to that rascally little Jew," said she. "I heard that he was mixed up with Lämmergeier, and I was very sorry to hear it. The turf is bad enough, goodness knows; but, depend upon it, an honest man has a much better chance upon the turf than he has in the City."

"How do you know?" asked Norma, smiling.

"Because I've had a shy at both, my dear; that's how I know. Lämmergeier has enriched himself by robbing widows and orphans."

"Isn't that what they say about all these great financiers?"

"Yes: and it's generally true too. I would make so bold as to give your father a word of warning, only it isn't over and above likely that he would listen to me. You haven't told me yet how London life suits you. I needn't ask whether you have begun slumming, because that's a matter of course; but I hope you are going about a little and seeing people. After all, one's own class has some slight claim upon one's notice, though it isn't clad in rags."

Norma mentioned a few of the houses to which she had been invited. "But of course we haven't a very large acquaintance," she said. "At least, I haven't;

papa seems to know everybody. I suppose that you have heard that the Wiltons are in town?"

Miss Travers nodded. "The old woman has taken the war-path," she remarked, "and I am told that she is upon the point of scoring another big success. Your tenant the ironmonger is a prize worth securing."

"But is he?" asked Norma. "Do you think he would make a good husband?"

"As good as most and better than some. He isn't a gentleman, which is so far against him; but then there are plenty of gentlemen who don't shine in a matrimonial capacity. If Madge Wilton were my daughter, I should consider him good enough for her."

"Perhaps you wouldn't, if she were your daughter. And I am not at all sure that she considers him so."

"She won't be consulted, I take it; but if she were, it wouldn't make much difference. That little girl is every bit as

worldly as her mother. She'll be a willing victim, you'll see."

Norma said she was not convinced of that. "Madge chooses to talk as if she was worldly; but a good deal of that is pretence, I think. She has had no experience; Sir Christopher is really the only serious admirer she has ever had, and I don't see why she shouldn't fall in love like other girls. If she were to meet anybody whom she could really care for—— "

"She would cry and throw him over, unless he had plenty of money," interrupted Miss Travers. "She wouldn't cry very long or very much. She has one of those hearts which concentrate the whole wealth of their affection upon a single person, and in her case the person has already been found. That person's name is Madge Wilton."

Norma did not smile at this witticism; but after a minute or so of silence she observed: "Madge is only a child. Cir-

cumstances may turn her into a woman any day, and neither you nor I can tell for certain how she will behave then."

"I can form a guess; the child is mother to the woman. Who is he?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, who is the man with whom you think she has fallen in love?"

Norma laughed a little. "Oh, I don't know that she has fallen in love with anybody; it is far more probable that he has fallen in love with her, and as I introduced them to each other, I have a sort of feeling of responsibility. He is Lord Walter Sinclair, whom I met a short time ago at Mrs. Lämmergeier's, after an interval of I forget how many years. He was a schoolboy once upon a time and now he is a sculptor."

"Oh, Walter Sinclair, is it? Then there's no great harm done. Walter is a good fellow in his way, but as cold as ice and as prudent as an old woman. I defy Madge to break his heart, and I know he

can't break hers, because she hasn't got one to be broken."

"Well, that's a way of talking; I don't believe in anybody's being heartless at her age. And I think you are wrong about Lord Walter. He isn't impetuous or enthusiastic, perhaps; but still waters run deep."

"I've known him all his life," said Miss Travers, "if that has anything to do with it."

There was a short pause, after which Norma asked, "Is he well enough off to marry, do you think?"

"No; his father left him £15,000, and his brother is a queer fish. He won't get much from his brother, I suspect. Now, Norma, if in the kindness of your heart you contemplate encouraging a match between those two, be advised by me and drop it. You'll only get yourself into trouble, and most assuredly no one will thank you. Let them flirt if they want to flirt; Mrs. Wilton will very soon put a

stop to that. When and where do they meet?"

"They are not in the habit of meeting anywhere," answered Norma; "but last night he came to the theatre with us, and he was certainly very attentive to Madge, and Sir Christopher didn't like it."

"Bless your innocence!" exclaimed Miss Travers; "doesn't it occur to you that Madge forced poor Walter to be attentive to her precisely in order that Sir Christopher mightn't like it?"

"Of course that may have been the case; but I don't think it was. It seemed to me that they were both in earnest; and so——"

"And so you are bent upon egging them on to commit an act of suicidal folly. It's some comfort to know that you haven't the remotest chance of succeeding."

But, as a result of further inquiry, it transpired that Norma did not really harbour the design attributed to her. She said that, so far as she was able to form an

opinion, Lord Walter and Madge had not very much in common, and the latter, she was persuaded, would never be happy as a poor man's wife. She confessed, however, that she knew next to nothing about Lord Walter, and, judging by the number of questions that she asked about his history, his tastes, his friends and so forth, she was very anxious to learn more.

Miss Travers replied to the best of her ability, and was careful not to exhibit a certain disquietude which gradually took possession of her while she was being catechised. But as she slowly descended the staircase, after taking her leave, she muttered under her breath, "Bother that little minx! Norma is too good for any man; still he is a gentleman and an honest fellow, and it would be a great thing to get her safely married and a comfortable sum settled upon her before her father ruins himself."

And when she stepped into the hansom which was waiting for her at the door she

did not at once answer the man's question of "Where to, mum?" It was not until the query had been twice repeated that she responded by giving the address of a rising young sculptor who dwelt in the vicinity of Holland Park.

Now, at six o'clock in the evening, even though the season be the height of summer, sculptors have generally knocked off work for the day; but Lord Walter had the habits of an amateur, and believed more or less in the theory of inspiration. Thus it not unfrequently happened to him to be idle for a whole week, after which, having been struck by a sudden idea, he would labour for six or seven consecutive hours to put it into execution; and so it was that he was putting the finishing touches to a very charming little female head when the head of Miss Travers, which could not truthfully be called either little or charming, was poked through the doorway of his studio.

"May I come in?" asked the intruder.

Lord Walter started and turned round. Then, with a smile of welcome upon his lips and in his blue eyes, "My dear Nell," he exclaimed, "of course you may! I had no idea you were in London. Will you sit down here, or will you come into the drawing-room and have a cup of tea? I possess a drawing-room."

"Thanks, the studio is good enough for me, and I've had my tea," answered Miss Travers, taking a chair. "I trust that this visit will not compromise you in the eyes of your servants."

"I don't think it will," answered Lord Walter, laughing.

"Nor do I; though you might have had the civility to say that you feared it would. One is middle-aged and hard-featured; but one has one's feelings, all the same. You don't seem to have a large collection of wares on hand. What is that thing that you're at work upon?"

She rose and scrutinized the clay which Lord Walter had been manipulating.

"I haven't hit upon a name for it yet," he answered. "It's a girl's head."

"That much I am able to discern by the light of my own unassisted intelligence. And I may add that it's an uncommonly poor likeness. Deprive Madge Wilton of her eyes, and you won't find much left in her worth looking at. Anyhow, you certainly won't find a mouth or a nose like those."

Lord Walter did not seem embarrassed. "And yet you recognize it at a glance," he observed. "That looks as if it couldn't be so very bad. Besides, who told you that it was meant for a likeness? Miss Wilton gave me an idea, and I endeavoured to improve upon it, that's all."

Miss Travers grunted. "Well," said she, "there's no denying that you have improved upon the original. Why you should have selected such an original, when you might have taken Norma Shafto instead, I don't understand."

"You would if you were an artist, Nell.

For one thing, Miss Shafto couldn't be improved upon. Then the habitual expression of her face would be extremely difficult to catch. It is constantly changing; although the general effect that she produces is that of a calm, self-reliant person. Now Miss Wilton's habitual expression isn't in the least difficult to catch—and I think you must admit that I have caught it."

"Oh, you've caught it right enough; the question is whether it was worth catching. However, I don't want to dictate to you what models you should choose. After all, if I had found you attempting to model a likeness of Norma, I should have thought it pretty cool of you."

"Exactly so; that's just what I should have thought of myself. But there's nothing divine about Miss Wilton, you see; one may take any liberties with her features and expression and feel no compunction at all when one has been found out."

"Oh, that's it, is it? And now let us proceed to business. Have you, by any chance, seen Loddondale lately?"

"Oddly enough, I have," answered Lord Walter. "He honoured me with a call a short time ago, and I can't recollect that he has ever in the whole course of his existence done such a thing before."

"Then, my dear, good friend," exclaimed Miss Travers earnestly, "for Heaven's sake tell me whether Nugget is going to win the Stockbridge Cup!"

"I don't know what you'll think of me when I confess that I never asked. I was not personally interested, because I don't bet, and I couldn't foresee that I should be consulted by you. But if I had asked, I shouldn't have been answered."

"Probably not; but I thought something might have leaked out in the course of conversation. Wasn't he brotherly enough to give you a single tip?"

"He was not. I doubt whether he would consider it any part of his duty as

a brother to give me information about his horses. As a matter of fact, we never mentioned racing at all."

"Never mentioned racing!" ejaculated Miss Travers incredulously. "Then what in the name of goodness did you talk about? I don't see how anybody could be five minutes in Loddondale's company without mentioning racing."

"Well, we had family affairs to discuss; we hadn't met since my poor old father died. And then Loddondale gave me his notions about the sculptor's art."

"They must have been worth listening to, I should think. No allusion to the Newmarket July, or Sandown, or Goodwood?"

"Not the faintest, I am sorry to say."

Miss Travers glanced at her watch and rose. "Under those circumstances," she remarked, "I may as well take myself off. I'm sorry you don't think it worth while to profit by your relationship to a man who owns some of the best horses in England."

"I'm sorry you think it worth your while to back two-year-olds about whom nothing is known," returned Lord Walter, laughing. "Nugget may turn out a marvellous performer; as far as I am aware, he has scarcely been tried yet. But I do recollect the fact that his sire was a roarer."

"Now, my dear Walter," said Miss Travers, "you mind your own business and leave me to mind mine. If you never make a greater fool of yourself than I have done hitherto, you'll get on pretty well."

She moved towards the door, but paused before she reached it and added, as an afterthought, "Well, if I were you, I should destroy that head. Sir Christopher Shearman is one of those ill-bred people who are apt to kick up a row if their wives' features are delivered over to the public in an unauthorized edition, and of course you know that they are going to marry him to Madge."

"Is that quite settled?"

"It isn't announced, but I believe it's settled. He is willing; so is Mrs. Wilton; and Madge conceals under a thin veil of unreasonableness one of the most reasonable dispositions that any mother could wish to have to deal with. You aren't smitten with her, are you? I should be sorry for you if you were. I shouldn't be so sorry for you if you were smitten with Norma Shafto; though of course Norma would never look at you."

"I should have thought that in that case you might have found some pity for the victim of a hopeless attachment."

"No; because it is good for everybody to have a high ideal, however unattainable it may be. If you see Loddondale again, try to find out something about Nugget, will you? I'm a busy woman, and I've wasted my time upon a fruitless errand this afternoon. Good-bye."

CHAPTER IX.

LORD WALTER BUYS A BOX.

Lord Walter was not ungrateful to his old friend Nell Travers for having come out all the way to Holland Park to see him. She meant kindly, no doubt, and her counsel, so far as it went, was excellent; only it really wasn't needed. He said to himself, as he stood gazing at the little head which had so unmistakable a look of Madge Wilton, that he was quite sure it wasn't needed. One has fancies; everybody has fancies from time to time. They serve to brighten the monotony of existence, and they are absolutely harmless, so long as those who harbour them are careful not to lose their heads. Now if there was one thing about which Lord

Walter was more positive than another, it was that he was never in any danger of losing his head. He was just as little likely to lose his heart. If he had known that he had been described a short time previously as being as cold as ice, he would have been rather pleased than otherwise. He knew that in reality he was not so; but it would have been quite satisfactory to him that others should think him so, because that would be evidence that he was able to keep his emotions under control.

That his emotions could hurry him into anything so ridiculous as a passion for Madge Wilton he had no fear at all. He flattered himself that he knew a little about feminine character, and hers was a very easy one to read. She was honestly, childishly selfish; her chief anxiety was to get as much amusement as she could out of a sad world; probably her powers of resistance were slight, and she would yield to maternal or other pressure rather than

have a fuss about anything. She would doubtless end by marrying Sir Christopher; and then—well, what would happen then was rather difficult to predict; but the chances were in favour of her accommodating herself to circumstances. She was not the sort of person to worry over sentimental troubles, so long as plenty of creature comforts were provided for her. All this did not of course prevent her from being extremely pretty and extremely charming, and Lord Walter would not perhaps have dissected her in so cold-blooded a manner if he had not been desirous of assuring himself of the coolness of his blood.

Having achieved that end, he felt at liberty to be a little sorry for her. Madge Wilton, if only the crooked could be made straight, ought to have been provided with a young, handsome, and devoted lover, whose income should be equivalent to Sir Christopher Shearman's. It was a great pity that no such person was forth-

coming, and Lord Walter spent some minutes in imagining himself such a person, although he took care to guard against the aberrations of a too exuberant fancy by bearing in mind that a life spent with Madge Wilton would by no means realize his own aspirations. Norma Shafto was, as old Nell had very truly said, a fitter ideal to worship, and he did not quite see why he should have been told in so off-hand a way that Norma would never look at him. However, for some reason or other, that line of thought was distasteful to him, and he soon abandoned it.

It was barely twenty-four hours later that this man of well-balanced mind set forth to call upon Mrs. and Miss Wilton, whose address had been obligingly furnished to him by the latter. In fact, to be strictly accurate, it was only about twenty hours later, and consequently a little too early in the day to call upon anybody. Lord Walter, for the benefit of his health, walked the whole way, and having crossed

Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, found himself in Bond Street at a time when most people are doing their shopping. The contagion of example may have led him to pay more attention than usual to the shop-windows, and it was natural enough that, on reaching the premises of a certain dealer in antiquities, he should have stood for a few seconds staring at an enamel snuff-box which was exhibited amongst other curiosities to attract the passers-by, and of which Miss Wilton had chanced to speak to him at the theatre. "The dearest little old box you ever saw in your life!" she had said. "Don't you love little boxes? When I see things of that kind I long more than ever to be rich."

The box, as Lord Walter's scrutiny satisfied him, was by no means a bad specimen of its kind, and it would, he felt, be matter for regret if it should be acquired by some rich person who in all probability would not appreciate it. He thought he

would just step into the shop and inquire the price. This, when stated to him by the obsequious dealer, proved to be somewhat startling; but then, as the dealer very reasonably pointed out, a fancy article must needs command a fancy price. Work such as that was daily becoming more and more rare, and he believed that if he were to consult his own interest he should keep it locked up for another year or two. Besides, the box in question possessed associations which enhanced its value, having once been the property of the Empress Maria Theresa.

Lord Walter contended that that was absolutely impossible and gave reasons for his contention. Thereupon the dealer consulted a memorandum-book, and without moving a muscle said he found he had made a little mistake: he should have said Marie Antoinette. After this there was a somewhat prolonged haggle, which ended, as both parties to it had known all along that it would end, in the

snuff-box passing into the possession and pocket of Lord Walter, who walked off with it to his club in St. James's Street.

As he was passing through the hall of that building he was accosted by a fussy, bustling little middle-aged person with a snub nose and an eyeglass. This was the Honourable Algernon Winstanley-Pettie, M.P., a Junior Lord of the Treasury and a frequenter of society in so far as his arduous Parliamentary labours would allow. He said, "How do you do, Sinclair? Saw you at the theatre the other night. Who was that uncommonly handsome woman whom you were with? The tall one I mean."

"A Miss Shafto," answered Lord Walter. "Her father has a place down in Stourshire, near Warbury."

"Oh, a *Miss* Shafto; I thought she looked like a married woman. Anyhow, she is remarkably handsome. I haven't seen such a handsome face for a long time."

Mr. Pettie paid this tribute to Norma's

personal attractions in the tone of one who knows that his praise is valuable, yet will not grudge it to those who deserve praise. "The other," he went on presently, "was pretty too, though in quite an inferior style. A younger sister?"

"No; a Miss Wilton," replied Lord Walter, wondering whether he would now be asked how it had come to pass that two unmarried ladies had shown themselves at a theatre without a chaperon.

But apparently that point had escaped the notice of Mr. Pettie, who said, "Oh, Miss Wilton, was it? I thought perhaps it might be when I saw Shearman sitting beside her. It struck me that poor Shearman wasn't enjoying himself much. The young lady seemed to talk a good deal more to you than to him, I thought. Is she a friend of yours?"

"Only a slight acquaintance," Lord Walter answered, and added, he hardly knew why, "Do you know anything about her?"

"Oh yes, I know all about her. Sister to Mrs. Lacy and Lady Huddersfield. Has a managing old mamma who has done pretty well with her daughters hitherto, and means to do well again, it seems. Shearman, as of course you know, has any amount of coin. Not that I should particularly care to marry him myself, if I were a young woman," concluded Mr. Pettie with a laugh.

"Why not?" Lord Walter inquired. "Is there anything against him?"

"Well, he's a lout, you know, and they say he's rather too good a judge of whisky. Shoots well, though, and will vote on the right side when he gets into the House, as I hear he is anxious to do. Fancy a man being anxious to get into Parliament in these days! I wish I could see my way to get out of it, I know!"

"But of course you can't be spared."

"Oh, I don't know; nobody is indispensable," said Mr. Pettie, who really thought that if anybody was he was. "I

suppose I must hold on till the next general election; but it's a great bore. One has no time to go about and see one's friends; I'm afraid I shan't even find time to be introduced to Miss Shafto, much as I should like it. In point of fact, I ought to be off to Westminster now."

Mr. Pettie bustled away, and Lord Walter, betaking himself to the reading-room, sat down behind a newspaper which he did not peruse. It was odd that the above careless remarks should have annoyed him; he himself thought it odd; but there was no doubt as to the fact. He even went so far as to utter certain objurgations against a social system which he had hitherto regarded with philosophic calm. Really, when you came to think of it, it was monstrous that a mere child like Madge Wilton should be delivered over for life to one who was certainly what Mr. Pettie had called him, a lout, and who was more likely than not to develop into a drunkard. How can mothers do such things!

They do such things cheerfully and thankfully every day, as Lord Walter knew; but perhaps he had never before felt so shocked at them and disgusted with them.

When he had made an end of moralizing, and judged that the hour for paying visits had arrived, he strolled slowly to the small private hotel in Dover Street where Mrs. Wilton had taken up her quarters for the season. As luck would have it, he was still waiting for somebody to appear in answer to his ring, when a hired brougham stopped at the door and Madge herself stepped lightly out on to the pavement.

"Are you here for the purpose of calling upon us?" she asked, favouring him with a particularly bright smile. "How nice of you! Do come in. I don't know whether mamma is at home; but if she isn't, she will be soon."

So he followed her, nothing loth, as she ran upstairs and flung open the door of a rather dingy little sitting-room; and per-

haps he was not very much disappointed when, in answer to Madge's inquiry, the waiter announced that Mrs. Wilton had not yet come in.

"Then bring up tea," said Madge—"and muffins. Do you like muffins?" she asked, turning to Lord Walter, "or shall we have some cake?"

"Muffins, please," answered Lord Walter, who was not particularly fond of that leathery form of nourishment, but was anxious to consult the tastes of his entertainer.

"Well," said Madge, after seriously considering the point for a moment, "perhaps we had better have both. Then we can choose. Now sit down and make yourself comfortable."

It may be remembered that Lord Walter's first impression of Miss Wilton had been that she was very shy; but first impressions are not always to be relied upon, and he perceived that in this instance he had been misled. There are people

who appear shy to the general public, but who are as easy and expansive as possible towards a favoured few, and such persons are naturally liked by the favoured few, who recognize in them the gift of just appreciation. Lord Walter thought it very pretty of Madge to open the heap of parcels which had been carried upstairs for her and to ask his opinion upon their contents.

"I have been doing an afternoon's shopping," she explained, "and I am completely ruined. Still one must be clad, mustn't one? Now tell me whether these two shades really blend. I suppose, being an artist, you know something about colour, though you don't belong to the painting division."

He was able to reply that the shades submitted to him could be harmoniously combined, and he was also able to compliment her upon the taste displayed in the selection of her other purchases.

"I have been shopping too," he remarked, after these had been fully dis-

cussed. "At least, I have been to one shop and done one successful deal." Thereupon he produced his prize, taking it out of the silver paper in which it was wrapped.

"Oh, my beloved little box!" exclaimed Madge, clasping her hands. "And to think it was I who put you on the track of it! Well, I am glad it is to be yours, since it never can be mine."

"But it is yours, if you will have it," said Lord Walter, smiling. "I bought it for you."

In spite of the matter-of-course tone in which he made this announcement, he was conscious of a certain feeling of uneasiness, of some doubt as to whether she would accept so valuable a present from him, possibly even of a slight misgiving as to the propriety of his offering it to her. But her manner of responding convinced him that, as regarded one of these points at any rate, he need not have disturbed himself. She took the proffered gift from his

hand with a little cry of delight, examined it closely, and then, raising a soft pair of eyes, beaming with gratitude, to his, exclaimed, "Oh, you *are* nice!"

After a pause, she resumed, "What made you think of getting it for me?"

"Well," he answered, laughing, "I thought you seemed to want it."

"Of course I wanted it; I would have given my ears for it! But never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that it would come into my possession. I shall always keep it," she added, stroking it affectionately, "and it will always remind me of you."

Now such a speech as that, when seen in uncompromising print, appears, it must be confessed, a trifle warm, not to say unbecoming, and indeed Mrs. Wilton, if she had heard it, might not have approved of it. But then all depends upon the way in which things are said, and Lord Walter, for his part, was quite sure that this dear little girl meant no more by her thanks than she would have meant in the not far

distant days when she had been still in the nursery. However, he could not help thinking her a dear little girl, and he hoped that her mother would not turn up just yet to interrupt a conversation which had been so pleasantly initiated.

His hopes were realized. Mrs. Wilton did not appear, and Madge and he partook of their muffins together in contentment and privacy. How, after touching upon a variety of other topics, they came to talk about Sir Christopher Shearman, he could not afterwards clearly remember. It would have been more prudent, no doubt, to avoid mentioning Sir Christopher; but since his name was introduced, it was perhaps unavoidable that he should be spoken of disparagingly. Lord Walter really behaved very well. All that he said—and that was said only in obedience to urgent persuasion—was, that in his opinion Sir Christopher was not exactly a gentleman.

But Madge was a good deal less discreet. She said, "I think he is a perfectly horrid

man! So cross and ill-tempered! And I do hate that way he has of sitting close to one and talking into one's face."

Lord Walter observed that he had not personally suffered from this habit of Sir Christopher's, but that he could well believe it to be disagreeable.

"And then," continued Madge dolefully, "he is always bothering me to dance with him. There is no pleasure in going to a ball when one knows that Sir Christopher will be lying in ambush at the foot of the stairs, ready to book half a dozen dances the moment that one appears."

"But surely it isn't necessary to give him all that he asks for?"

Madge shook her head and sighed. "A great many things are necessary," said she oracularly, "which may not appear so to those who don't know. Besides, one can't very well say that one is engaged when one is intercepted before reaching the ball-room. It is a mean advantage to take. But he takes it."

Lord Walter laughed. "The only remedy I can suggest," said he, "is that I should procure invitations to all the balls that you are going to. Then, upon your arrival, you will find me waiting for you under the portico beside the linkman, and I will at once request you to give me every dance upon the programme, except two squares, which may be thrown as a sop to Sir Christopher. I need hardly add that you will be at liberty to discard me afterwards. I should only claim a small commission—say, ten per cent."

"Perhaps I might be willing to give you more than that, if you cared to have more," Madge returned. "I am sure you dance well. One can always tell by looking at people whether they will be good partners or not, don't you think so?"

This kind of talk went on for another quarter of an hour, at the expiration of which time Mrs. Wilton came in and put a stop to it. Mrs. Wilton was civil, but not very cordial. She evidently wondered

why Lord Walter had been admitted in her absence, and did not seem quite satisfied with his explanation that he had met Miss Wilton at the door and had been induced to come in and wait a few minutes. Conversation was kept up with difficulty, and met with no support from Madge, who immediately upon her mother's entrance became once more the demure young lady whom Lord Walter had received in his studio. He stayed a little longer for form's sake, but took his leave as soon as he could decently do so.

One thing he noticed, and that was the abrupt disappearance of the enamel snuff-box. He was glad that it should have vanished, because, under all the circumstances, he did not particularly wish Mrs. Wilton to see it; but at the same time its concealment struck him as suggestive. Furthermore, it struck him that if he did not mind what he was about he might get himself as well as somebody else into trouble.

CHAPTER X.

LÄMMERGEIER AS AN ORATOR.

It is the prerogative of the wealthy and distinguished to follow the bent of their caprice or fancy in selecting friends for themselves. The rest of us cannot do this, because there is no certainty that our advances will be received with gratitude; so we have to wait until people show some signs of a disposition to like us before we venture to proclaim our liking for them. Mrs. Lämmergeier, if not distinguished, was extremely wealthy, and Mrs. Lämmergeier had taken a fancy to Norma Shafto. This being so, previous experience would have justified her in assuming that she had only to make her sentiments known in order to obtain an assurance that they

were reciprocated; but she was a woman who possessed some insight into character, and probably one of her reasons for being attracted by Norma was that she suspected her of differing from the ordinary run of human beings in certain respects. Instead therefore of inviting Miss Shafto to drive in the Park with her and taking her back to dinner afterwards, she presented herself in Upper Belgrave Street one morning and announced that she had a favour to ask.

Now anybody who requested a favour of this singular young woman might count upon its being granted, if that were in any way possible, and might count also upon giving her pleasure by the mere fact of making the request. Some people are constituted after that odd fashion. Moreover the particular favour which Mrs. Lämmergeier had decided to solicit was one which no right-minded and tender-hearted person could have wished to refuse.

"I want you to take me in hand, Miss Shafto," she began, in her abrupt way. "I serve no useful purpose whatsoever in the world, except to entertain my husband's friends, and whether even that is a useful function seems open to question. I hear you are engaged in a number of schemes for improving the condition of the working classes. Don't you think you might turn me to account in a subordinate capacity?"

"I'm only a subordinate myself," answered Norma; "but no doubt I could easily find work for you to do if you are quite sure that you won't find it distasteful. Most people, you know, do find it distasteful—and discouraging too."

"I am not likely to be discouraged," Mrs. Lämmergeier declared; "I have no extravagant expectations. And I defy you to provide me with any occupation or duties more distasteful to me than my present ones. When I am not standing at the head of my own staircase I am climbing up the staircases of other people. It is

the same story night after night and week after week, and words can't express how sick I am of it. This eternal getting up stairs is like being put upon the treadmill in more ways than one. Hermann and I plod doggedly on; but we don't get any higher, and, between you and me, I doubt whether we ever shall. Suppose, however —for everything is conceivable—that we do eventually reach the top landing and stay there: what then? Some fine day we shall die; and it doesn't seem to me that having been asked to Buckingham Palace or Marlborough House will be any great comfort to me upon my death-bed. Whereas it might be a comfort to think that I had tried to make a few of my fellow-creatures a little less miserable. One understands the ambition of a *nouveau riche* who has a family; but I have no children."

The last words were spoken with a touch of genuine sadness which at once enlisted Norma's sympathies. That same

evening Mrs. Lämmergeier (disregarding several previous engagements for the purpose) was conducted to a part of London which had hitherto been as unknown to her as Central Africa, and was brought into contact with persons of whose existence she had only been aware in the same way as one is aware of the existence of certain savage tribes. Work, too, was found for her which she cheerfully undertook and conscientiously performed; although she perceived from the outset that Norma and her associates were endeavouring to grapple with a problem far too big for them. However, she attained what, after all, had been her original object in that she secured a friend for herself.

"I believe she is a good woman, and I don't think she is a very happy one," Norma said to Mr. Shafto, who had noticed with pleasure the intimacy which had sprung up between the rich financier's wife and his daughter, and who replied with a laugh—

"My dear child, if she isn't happy she must be rather hard to please. But I suppose no woman likes to admit that she has got all she wants."

That, perhaps, is an admission which would not be very willingly made by man or woman, and could not truthfully be made by any appreciable portion of the inhabitants of the world. The people on whose behalf Norma and Mrs. Lämmergeier were exerting themselves wanted a great many things, and to all appearance were exceedingly unlikely to get them: yet they were not much given to repining.

"It seems impossible that they can enjoy life," Mrs. Lämmergeier exclaimed one day, with a shade of impatience; "but, upon my word and honour, I believe they do!"

"It is a very good thing that they do," said Norma.

"Well, that's as may be. If I were one of them I think I should wish for a rather more widespread feeling of discontent.

Did you ever hear a debate in the House of Commons?"

Norma shook her head.

"Come with me to-morrow evening, and you will have the advantage of listening to a philanthropic oration from Hermann. Hermann is always an effective speaker; but when he gets on to the subject of benevolence he is nothing short of sublime. To-morrow some wiseacre or other is going to bring forward a motion to the effect that the condition of the working classes demands inquiry, and Hermann, I believe, means to back him up. We needn't stay long if you find it dull; but I assure you that there are times when a debate in the House is as amusing as any play."

The House of Commons, we are often told, is not an imposing assembly, and no one is fonder of saying this than its own members, but after all any assembly is imposing or otherwise in accordance with the impression produced upon the mind of the spectator, which impression depends

more upon the mind of the spectator than upon the assembly. Norma, when she looked down upon the line of Conservative statesmen who were at that time in office, and upon the opposing phalanx, headed by Mr. Gladstone and supplemented by the forces of Mr. Parnell, was a good deal impressed, feeling that she was in the presence of men who ruled the destinies of a vast empire. Their manner of doing so may not be altogether dignified, their attitudes may not convey the idea that they realize the fulness of their responsibility, their methods of expressing approval and displeasure can scarcely be called refined, but the fact remains that they can give effect to their wishes—at least, a few of them can—and this, in Norma's opinion, made them interesting to watch.

Mrs. Lämmergeier's view was perhaps more superficial. "A lot of naughty little schoolboys who wanted to get a rise out of their masters would behave just like that, if they hadn't the fear of the birch before

their eyes," she whispered. "There is an individual called Black Rod who sometimes makes his appearance here, but his functions are not what you might suppose from his name, more's the pity!"

But this was during question time, while unhappy Ministers were being badgered and baited by their adversaries. That form of sport having at length become exhausted, somebody moved the adjournment of the House for the consideration of a matter of urgent public importance; and so the question of what was to be done with the unemployed came on.

At that season of the year the unemployed were neither numerous nor menacing; but they had been both in the course of the preceding winter, and their claims to attention would have been brought before the House earlier if the debate upon the Address and certain bills which demanded an immense amount of discussion had not blocked the way. The British public, in point of fact, had arrived, as it

so frequently does in the presence of difficulties, at a vague conclusion that "something ought to be done;" in other words, that a Royal Commission ought to be appointed with a view to shelving the question for a time. This being a proposition which commanded general assent, a plain man might have thought that there was no great need for talking about it. However several well-informed persons were fully determined to talk about it; and amongst these was Baron Lämmergeier.

When Norma saw the swarthy little man rise, adjust his *pince-nez* and tuck his hands under his coat-tails, she glanced for an instant at her neighbour, upon whose rather thin lips a cynical smile was perceptible. Norma had never heard Baron Lämmergeier speak before; but from what she had seen of him in private life, she did not imagine that his oratory would be of a very attractive description. Nevertheless, before he had been ten minutes on his legs, she was listening to him with interest and

curiosity. He had a decidedly Hebraic method of enunciation; the letter S was a stumbling-block to him, and he seemed to be suffering from a slight cold in the head; yet he spoke clearly and in short telling sentences. His speech was temperate and not very sanguine in tone; though it appeared that, while deprecating the principle of State interference, he was in favour of the Royal Commission. It did not, when summed up, amount to very much more than an expression of opinion that the duty of the State is to be economical and the duty of the individual is to be generous; but its commonplaces were well put and—perhaps because they were commonplaces—were well received.

Norma was both pleased and surprised. "I agree with every word that he said," she declared, turning to the orator's wife, who smiled and remarked—

"I told you that Hermann was an effective speaker."

The fact is that Norma, in common, it

may be, with a good many others who had been listening to Baron Lämmergeier, had gathered that that gentleman was himself generous, as well as cool-headed and far-sighted.

"Hermann," observed Mrs. Lämmergeier presently, "knows how to suit himself to his audience; and that, no doubt, is half the battle. He has several styles. You have heard him here; perhaps you would like to hear him on the stump next. All things considered, I am not sure that I don't prefer him on the stump."

Thus it was that, not many days after this, Norma, in company with a number of other ladies and gentlemen, took her place upon the platform of a large public hall wherein Baron Lämmergeier proposed to deliver an address to his constituents. These inhabited one of the western districts of London and were for the most part Conservatives, as beseems those who have something to lose. They had however a very fair sprinkling of disinterested

Radicals among them, and as Lämmergeier never attempted to exclude political opponents from his meetings, there was every prospect of his being a good deal interrupted before he brought his discourse to a close.

"That is what he likes," Mrs. Lämmergeier explained to Norma. "Hermann is the happy possessor of an imperturbable temper and a sound pair of lungs. He is under the impression that he never holds a meeting without making converts; but whether that is a correct theory or not I don't pretend to say."

It was at any rate quite a plausible one. By the time that the orator had got into full swing he had evidently put his audience in a good humour; which, as most public speakers are aware, is no such simple feat to accomplish. He did not in the least mind being shouted at or hissed; he waited smilingly till the hubbub had subsided and then went on. Some of his rejoinders were extremely happy, and he had a deft fashion of insinuating that he was in the

counsels of the Ministry which was not without effect. The Lämmergeier of the House of Commons was a shrewd, practical man of business; the Lämmergeier of the platform was a jovial, humorous politician who seemed determined to justify the character attributed to him by his supporters when they welcomed him with a chorus of "For he's a jolly good fellow."

Some of them had reasons, perhaps, for thinking him a jolly good fellow. Bribery and corruption have been put an end to by the Legislature; but what Act of Parliament can suppress the promptings of a generous heart when no election is imminent? It may even be that many of those who yelled at Baron Lämmergeier were not really anxious to get rid of so open-handed a representative.

As for Norma, circumstances prevented her from drawing any comparison between the present harangue and that to which she had been privileged to listen at Westminster; for the speaker had hardly

finished his exordium when somebody slipped into a chair behind her, and Lord Walter's voice whispered in her ear, "Do you find this sort of thing as entertaining as a burlesque?"

"I haven't had time to judge yet," she answered. "Do you?"

"Not quite, I think. Lämmergeier is sometimes amusing; but I can't say that I came here with any anticipation of being amused."

"Why did you come, then? Are you going to make a speech?"

"Heaven forbid! But I am a humble constituent of the Baron's, and I have eaten his salt more than once, and as he did me the honour to request my presence this evening, the path of duty seemed plain. I have been rewarded by meeting you. After all, burlesque and political speeches depend more for their attractiveness upon the company in which one listens to them than upon their intrinsic merits."

"Is that why you don't find this per-

formance quite as entertaining as the performance of the other night?"

The question was put with a smile, and to those who do not chance to be in love it may seem rather odd that Lord Walter, so far from protesting, was perceptibly pleased by Miss Shafto's innuendo. Love is proverbially blind; lovers are doubtless apt to be fools, and the wisest of them, while suffering from this malady, are no whit less foolish than their neighbours. King Solomon himself, who appears to have been a lover upon an unusually extensive scale, got himself into serious trouble, as we know, through his susceptibility. So Lord Walter, who had by this time reached the point of admitting to himself that he was in love with Madge Wilton, began to talk about her at once, feeling instinctively that he had got hold of a sympathetic auditor.

It is too bad of people who have been provided with places upon a platform for the express purpose of having their minds

improved by one of the prominent politicians of the day to keep up a subdued murmur of conversation throughout his most brilliant periods; but such things will occur and do occur, and as Baron Lämmergeier's back was turned towards this couple it may be hoped that his feelings were not hurt by their scandalous inattention. Mrs. Lämmergeier, who watched them out of the corner of her eye, freely forgave them, and was not ill-pleased to see them upon such intimate terms. She thought them an extremely handsome couple, as indeed they were—he bending forward and talking eagerly, and she with her head slightly tilted back to listen to him. They looked a great deal more like lovers than friends; and how was Mrs. Lämmergeier to guess that between them they were hatching a plot which could only be expected to end in disappointment and disaster?

This plot, it is true, was not expressly formulated. Lord Walter did not say in

so many words that he was determined to marry Madge Wilton if she would have him, nor did Norma promise to give him all the help in her power; but they understood one another, and perhaps Lord Walter had some reason for whispering gratefully, when the meeting broke up, "You are more than kind to me, Miss Shafto; I don't know what right I have to inflict my antiquated notions upon you."

Norma laughed. "But my notions are antiquated too, you see," she remarked.

What had she said to him? No more than what she conscientiously thought. She had agreed with him that *mariages de convenance* are detestable; she had admitted that Sir Christopher Shearman without his money would not be worthy of Madge; she had confessed that she would a thousand times rather see Madge married to a man who loved her and whom she loved than to a millionaire, and she had hinted that, should such a personage be forthcoming, he might count upon her favour

and support. In all this there was nothing to retract or regret; yet, as she drove home with Mrs. Lämmergeier, she seemed tired and out of spirits, and it was a relief to her to escape from the questionings of that too inquisitive friend.

CHAPTER XI.

AT LORD'S.

As a matter of theory, everybody admits that it is an absurd and foolish thing to fall in love with a pretty face; yet—so far, at least, as the male sex is concerned—it is not very usual to fall in love with anything else; and perhaps this reflection may have consoled Lord Walter when he found that he was beyond all question in love with Madge Wilton. He stood in need of some consolation, because he knew perfectly well that the course of true love could not by any possibility be made to run smooth in this case. Strictly speaking, he could not afford to marry. Prospects of a kind he had; but they were of a very indefinite kind, and he had to con-

tend against a rival with a formidable purse, not to speak of a lady who might be more resolute than she looked, and who quite certainly would not be desirous of becoming his mother-in-law. Moreover, he knew nothing in the world about Madge, except that she was pretty and charming and that he loved her.

Being thus in much perplexity of mind, and the opportunity presenting itself, he sought counsel of Norma Shafto, with the result which has been mentioned. The unspoken contract into which they had entered did not, however, bear any immediate fruit, and was thus a source of disappointment to one of them, who had thought that special facilities would perhaps be granted to him for holding private converse with the object of his adoration. Norma was not disposed to befriend him to that extent—at any rate, she was not disposed to do so as yet; for it remained to be seen whether Madge was as serious as he was. So he had to

make the best of chance meetings, and these were few and unsatisfactory. On such occasions as he did encounter Miss Wilton she was closely attended by the inevitable Shearman, and although she seemed pleased to see him, she was evidently not quite at her ease and would not consent to give him anything like the number of dances that he asked for.

"I suspect that you really prefer your dancing bear to any other partner," he was provoked into exclaiming once. "I am here on purpose to deliver you from him; but I don't believe you want to be delivered."

"You wouldn't say that if you had ever had to hobble through a waltz with him," she returned, sighing deeply.

"Then why do you hobble through such a number of waltzes with him?"

"Because — because — well, because I should be scolded if I didn't. Some people can bear being scolded; I can't. There is mamma making signals to me; please take

me back to her." She added in a hurried undertone, "My sister Mrs. Lacy is going to give a fancy ball at the end of next month. She says she doesn't know you; but she will send you an invitation, and I have implored her to leave out Sir Christopher."

This was all very well; but the end of next month was a long time off, and there was no saying what might not happen in the interim. The next time that Lord Walter met Norma Shafto he used less ambiguous language than he had done on Baron Lämmergeier's platform, and asked plainly that he might be given some opportunity of talking to Miss Wilton when neither her mother nor Sir Christopher should be present to mar the harmony of the proceedings.

Norma hesitated for a few seconds before making any response to this request. At length she said, "I don't think I ought to ask you to come here some afternoon and meet her. Of course I could do it easily

enough; but it seems a little underhand somehow, and I should not like Mrs. Wilton to say that I had played her false. Perhaps I might help you a little with Madge, that is all. As for meeting her and talking to her, I am afraid you must fight that part of the battle for yourself."

Lord Walter said, "Thank you; it is very kind of you;" but looked despondent, nevertheless. He may have thought that a really useful ally would have taken the part which was assigned to him, and would have left him that which seemed to belong more properly to a suitor. However, he refrained from giving utterance to his thoughts (and indeed had no occasion to do so, since they were obvious enough), and presently, by way of comforting him, Norma remarked—

"We are going to take Madge to the University cricket-match on Saturday. You will be there, perhaps?"

"Of course I shall," he replied, brightening up.

"Mrs. Wilton will not, because she has an appointment with the dentist. I can't answer for Sir Christopher."

"I wish he had an appointment with the dentist for to-day, and I wish I were the dentist!" exclaimed Lord Walter.

"But if you drew every tooth in his head, I am afraid you would not make him a bit less eligible. And you need not thirst for his blood. I dare say you will hurt him more than any dentist could before you have done with him."

There could be no doubt at all but that Lord Walter would do so if he could, and it would have been preposterous to expect him to feel any pity for a competitor who was so much more favourably handicapped than he was. But when, on the ensuing Saturday, he joined the throng at Lord's and made his way up to the carriage in which Norma and Madge and Mr. Shafto were seated, he was rejoiced to find that the foe was absent. One may be resolved to treat any man's jealousy with indiffer-

ence; but it is for the comfort of all concerned to avoid making him jealous, if that can be managed.

Madge was in one of the moods which he had discovered to be intermittent and which he had begun to fear were rare. She held out her hand at once to him, saying, "Oh, I'm so glad you have come! I was wondering whether by any chance you would be here." Then she bent over the side of the carriage and whispered, "The cat is away and the mice may play for once."

"Who is the cat?" he inquired, also in a whisper. "Sir Christopher Shearman?"

She made a grimace. "Oh no; he's never far away, and he may turn up at any moment. I meant mamma."

It is not at all right of a girl to describe her mother as a cat. Her mother may be a cat and everybody may know it; but she is hardly the proper person to say so, and young ladies are hereby warned that if they do such things, they will very likely

lose the esteem of any man whose esteem is worth having. The young ladies may retort, to be sure, that at certain times and to certain persons they may with impunity say just exactly what they please; and in the presence of that indisputable truth *censor morum* can but bow his head and hold his tongue. Lord Walter was not as a rule very lenient to offences against good taste; yet he did not seem to object at all to Madge's undutiful explanation, but only laughed and asked what game the mice were to play at.

"Wouldn't you like to take a turn round the ground?" he suggested imploringly. "You can't see anything of the cricket from where you are."

Madge glanced at Norma, who was looking the other way, and at Mr. Shafto, who was busily engaged in conversation with a friend on the opposite side of the carriage. Then she nodded. "Open the door," said she; "I'll come."

Lord Walter was helping her to alight

when he received a sudden slap on the back, and, turning round, was not altogether overwhelmed with delight at finding himself face to face with his brother. Lord Loddondale was independent enough, or aristocratic enough, to consult his own inclinations in the matter of costume, and did not always think it necessary, when in London, to adopt the style of attire which is held to be more or less compulsory by humbler folk. On the present occasion he wore a pot hat and a light-coloured coat, while his nether man was clad in cords and Newmarket boots. It was his opinion that a man who rides in trousers is a very uncomfortable man, and as he had ridden to Lord's and meant to ride away again, he had naturally arrayed himself with a view to comfort.

"Want to back the old shop, Walter?" he asked. "I should be glad to see our side win; but business is business, and I'm ready to lay a shade of odds on Cambridge."

Lord Walter did not want to bet and did not at all want to be detained at that particular moment; but what are you to do when a man hooks you by the arm and begins discussing bowling and fielding as though nobody else had any claim upon your attention? What Lord Walter did may not have been justifiable, but was at least effectual. Seeing that Norma had turned her head and was looking at him, he promptly took a step towards the carriage and said, "Miss Shafto, may I introduce my brother Loddondale? I think you used to know one another in old days."

Then, while Lord Loddondale was combining a bow to the lady with a ferocious side-glance at the introducer, he walked away with Madge Wilton as fast as he could.

Lord Loddondale passed for a woman-hater. He was, at all events, a hater of the society of ladies, never knowing what to say to them unless they chanced to have sporting tastes, and being possessed with a

not wholly erroneous idea that, if unmarried, they would at once begin doing all they possibly could to make him marry them. But in a surprisingly short space of time he discovered that Norma was not as other girls are and that he had nothing at all to fear from her.

She made some allusion to the far-away time "when we were all children," and then, with that happy instinct which she had of hitting upon the right topic of conversation, remarked, "I think you have both turned out exactly as one might have expected; you have taken up racing and your brother has taken up art. You breed your own horses, don't you?"

"I am beginning to do so," said Lord Loddondale. "Until lately I haven't had money enough to attempt it; but of course that's what every racing man would prefer to do if he could."

"So I should think; and if I were a racing man I should certainly never bet."

At this Lord Loddondale pursed up his lips and shook his head. "You'd have to be a Rothschild then," he declared. "There are owners who don't bet; but they're men who can afford to face two or three bad years in succession. I'm not one of those lucky beggars, so I have to make a business of it, don't you see."

"But then it ceases to be a sport, doesn't it?"

"I don't see why. There's a lot of humbug talked about betting, Miss Shafto. Some people say it's wrong, and then there are others, like you, who say sport oughtn't to be a trade. Now that's what I call humbug, you know. Look at Walter and his graven images. He sells 'em—at least, he would if he could—but you call him an artist, all the same. And authors sell their books, and bishops are handsomely paid for—for doing whatever it is that bishops have to do. Why isn't the poor racing man to be allowed to turn an honest penny? If his accounts come out square

at the end of the year it's about all they do, I can tell you!"

Well, the subject was not one upon which Norma could speak with any great authority, and perhaps she did not argue her case very forcibly or make all the points that she might have made. But at the end of a quarter of an hour she had succeeded in earning the esteem and admiration of her interlocutor, and she had also succeeded in getting him to talk about his brother, of whom he spoke very kindly and with perfect frankness.

"Walter's badly off," he said, "and it's my fault that he is. I've offered to make him an allowance; but he's proud and won't have it. I shall say no more about it just at present. He's sure to marry some day, and then I dare say he'll listen to reason and let me do what I can for him. Walter is just the sort of fellow who's bound to marry before long, don't you think so? Good-looking and what women call interesting, you know, and all

that. Romantic too; though he wouldn't like to be called so."

There seemed to be some good in this rather unpolished inheritor of an ancient title. People called him disreputable; but perhaps that was only because he looked like a groom and didn't go out into society. Norma made no reply to his question; but she was glad to hear that, in the event of Lord Walter's marrying a dowerless damsel, the head of the family would be prepared to do what is just and customary on such occasions.

Meanwhile, the subject of her solicitude was not getting on quite as well as might have been anticipated with his dowerless damsel. He had not, indeed, walked a hundred yards by Miss Wilton's side when Sir Christopher Shearman appeared; and Sir Christopher, as soon as he descried the couple, looked as black as thunder. This did not disturb Lord Walter in the least, and he had not imagined that it would disturb his neighbour; yet—so

impossible is it to account for the whims of women or to calculate upon their consistency—she seemed a good deal put out when Sir Christopher said, "Well, I shall be off. Two's company, three's none, and I don't particularly care about watching second-rate cricket."

She lowered her parasol a little, and under cover of that shield whispered to Sir Christopher (for Lord Walter heard her distinctly), "How *stupid* you are!"

Then the parasol was raised again, and lo and behold! the countenance of Sir Christopher was shining like the sun when he emerges from behind a cloud; and so the trio sauntered on together, Madge walking in the middle, with an admirer on either side of her.

Two are company and three are none. That discovery was made long before the birth of Sir Christopher Shearman; but when three people are together it may sometimes be doubtful which of them, if he has any sense of self-respect, ought to

retire. Lord Walter was soon relieved from any uncertainty as regarded himself. Madge did not seem to hear him when he spoke to her; she laughed inordinately at some feeble witticism in which Sir Christopher was pleased to indulge at the expense of the batsmen; she even went the length of wondering whether it would not be possible to gets seats in the Pavilion. Now Sir Christopher was a member of the Marylebone Club and Lord Walter was not. The latter therefore caught sight of a friend, bowed, and withdrew.

A smile was upon his lips, but wrath was in his heart, and if he had been a sensible man he would then and there have bidden a final adieu to Miss Madge Wilton. Unluckily, he was not a sensible man, because he was in love, and he was not the less in love with this capricious girl by reason of his being so justly indignant against her. He wandered away, and, after a time, encountered his brother and Miss Shafto, to whom he mentioned that

he was going home. The look of wonder and pity which he detected in Norma's eyes did not perhaps put him in any better humour.

"What's the matter with Walter?" Lord Loddondale inquired innocently of his companion. "Looks as if he wanted to knock somebody down, doesn't he? He can't have been losing his money either, because the match is going to end in a draw, as anybody can see."

The match did, in truth, terminate shortly afterwards as Lord Loddondale had predicted that it would, and perhaps it was not the only game which had been played that day with an undecisive result. But Norma, as she drove homewards with Madge (Mr. Shafto having departed for his club), resolved that she would at least find out what object certain players had in view. So she said, without any circumlocution—

"I wish I could feel sure of you, Madge! Sometimes it seems to me as if you really

wished to marry Sir Christopher, though you say you don't."

"You may feel perfectly sure," answered Madge, who by this time was looking tired and depressed, "that that is quite the last thing in the world that I should wish to do."

"Why do you encourage him then? And why do you encourage—others? I don't think it is quite fair, if you mean nothing by it."

At this Madge began to laugh and showed signs of recovering her lost spirits. "Have others been complaining?" she asked. "Others mustn't be so exacting; others mustn't imagine that they are going to have everything all their own way. An occasional mild rebuff would do others no sort of harm, I suspect."

"I don't agree with you," said Norma. "I don't see the use of behaving in that way, and—and if I were a man, I should be disgusted by it."

"But, my dear old Norma, you are not

a man, though you are rather like one in some ways. I can tell you what disgusts a man more than anything else; it is getting what he wants without the slightest difficulty."

"Well—but is Lord Walter to get what he wants?"

"Oh, Norma, how you jump to conclusions! What does Lord Walter want? I'm sure *I* don't know; and it is not at all certain that he himself does."

After this there was a pause. Then Norma said, "I suppose you mean that you are only flirting with him. I am glad you have told me, because now I can warn him of what he has to expect. And I will."

To this menace no immediate rejoinder was vouchsafed; but presently there arose a little sniffing noise, and Madge's handkerchief was hastily pulled out of her pocket. "Not very kind," were the only intelligible words which reached Norma's ears out of a confused and choking murmur. Norma Shafto would have possessed

a remarkably clear head if she had not also been gifted, or afflicted, with a remarkably soft heart. She could not bear to see poor little Madge crying; so, instead of taking no notice, as she ought to have done, she began to apologize and accuse herself of cruelty.

Cruel Madge agreed that she most certainly was. "It is all very well for you; you are your own mistress and can do as you please. You don't know what I have to submit to at home and how I should have been scolded if Sir Christopher had gone off in a huff. And I am not a flirt, whatever you may say. The only thing is that I daren't always do what I should like to do."

Thus Dover Street was reached without any definite announcement having been made as to Lord Walter's chance of success, although before then Norma had been induced to withdraw her threat of cautioning him against one who would not willingly cause unhappiness to anybody.

CHAPTER XII.

MADGE MAKES AMENDS.

THE next day being Sunday, Lord Walter ought to have gone to church in the morning, and this he would have done (for it was his custom to go to church once a week) if he had not felt his mental condition to be such that he could not hope for any real benefit either from prayers or sermon. "Unless you can manage to keep your thoughts from wandering," he had been told authoritatively from the pulpit not long before, "you had far better remain at home." Therefore he remained at home and smoked a pipe and allowed his thoughts to wander. His thoughts were not of a very exhilarating nature; but such as they were, he would have

preferred being left alone with them to being interrupted by a visit from his brother.

"I didn't know what the deuce to do with myself," Lord Loddondale announced; "so I strayed out here upon the chance of finding you in. How I hate Sunday!"

"I should have thought it was much the same as other days to you," remarked Lord Walter.

"You would, would you? Well, it ain't. There's no racing on Sunday and no whist and no billiards. Gay young dogs like you swagger about in the Park and then go and call upon their friends and then dine out; but I'm not exactly what you could call a lady-killer; so that by the time I've read the *Observer* and the *Field* and the *Sporting Times* I'm about ready to go and hang myself."

"You should cultivate the society of ladies," said Lord Walter; "it would be a change and a relaxation for you to mix with them once a week, and you seem to

hit it off with some of them tolerably well when you are driven to it. I noticed that you and Miss Shafto got on capitally yesterday afternoon."

Lord Loddondale had not removed his hat, which was cocked slightly over one eye. He had seated himself in his favourite attitude, astride upon a chair, with his arms folded upon the back of it. In reply to his brother's observation he nodded emphatically. "We did indeed," said he. "Miss Shafto is a girl in a thousand. No humbug about her, no infernal airs, no nasty little dodges of getting you to say more than you mean, don't you know? Upon my word, if I were a marrying man—— However, I'm not a marrying man."

"Non-marrying men usually end by marrying," observed Lord Walter, who for some reason or other was not best pleased by his brother's eulogy of a lady the refinement of whose character he must naturally be quite unable to appreciate.

"You will marry as a matter of course. Indeed, it's your duty to do so, I suppose."

"Duty or no duty, I don't mean to do it," answered Lord Loddondale shortly. "If it suits me to remain a bachelor, I don't know who has a right to complain. You least of anybody."

"My dear fellow, I'm not complaining; I only venture to predict that you won't remain a bachelor very long."

"I shouldn't advise you to back your opinion. All the same, Miss Shafto is a nice girl and a good girl—and you're a thundering ass, Walter."

"Thank you; but why?"

"Because, instead of making up to her as you might, you're running after a confounded little flirt who can't compare with her even in looks, and who'll see you jolly well hanged before she'll consent to share your humble lot. I'm not acquainted with the young woman and don't want to be; but other fellows are, and I asked a few questions about her last night at the club.

She's going to marry that rich beggar Shearman, who has taken Brampton Priory, and she sent you about your business yesterday because he has a beast of a temper and she's afraid of losing him if she puts his back up. Now don't you make any mistake about it: she'll flirt with you as much as you please when it isn't too risky, but if ever she marries you I'll eat my hat. I tell you this, Walter, because you're a good boy, though you set up to be a man of the world, and I don't believe you'd care to console yourself by flirting with Lady Shearman."

The worst of it was that these counsels really seemed to be based upon a foundation of common sense. It was a little absurd and a little irritating that they should come from such a quarter; still doubtless they were kindly meant, and although a man of the world may not altogether relish being called a good boy, he is not so foolish as to repudiate such a description of his character. Lord Walter, therefore, gravely thanked

his mentor, mentioned that he was quite aware of the circumstance that Miss Wilton's relations intended to bestow her upon Sir Christopher Shearman, and changed the subject to one upon which Lord Loddondale was perhaps better qualified to speak.

"Old Nell Travers was here a short time ago," he said. "She came to ask for some tips about your horses; but I was obliged to send her empty away. Are you inclined to be generous and give her a hint?"

Then it was curious to see how Lord Loddondale's countenance changed. Ordinarily he had the appearance of a very wide-awake, not to say cunning, young man; but now the corners of his mouth drooped, his lips parted, his brows were raised, and his eyes opened very wide with an expression of bewilderment and concern. He looked like some guileless youth to whom a hard question has been put, which he would fain answer, but cannot, by

reason of his ignorance. "A hint?" he repeated vaguely. "About what?"

"At the time she seemed to be chiefly anxious to know whether Nugget would win at Stockbridge; but that's over, and Nugget, I believe, didn't secure a place."

"Oh no; he wasn't placed. I'm sorry if she put her money upon him. I could have told her that he hadn't a chance; and, as it happens, that is the only thing that I could have told her for certain about any horse of mine."

"Perhaps she didn't put her money upon him. I dare say she would be glad to hear a few words of wisdom about the Goodwood Stakes and Cup."

"Oh, she fancies the Conjuror and Hengist, I suppose. Well, they *may* win their races, and I hope they will; but one can't be too careful in giving advice to a friend."

"I'll tell her to leave Goodwood alone, then," said Lord Walter, much amused.

"That will be the safest plan, no doubt. The Conjuror is a very uncertain horse, and although I should have said that Hengist had a pretty good chance of pulling off the Cup, the public evidently thinks otherwise."

Lord Loddondale was proceeding to point out that the public, after all, is about as good a judge of any horse's merits as the owner of the animal is likely to be, when a note was brought in to his brother, who, after glancing at it, slipped it into his pocket unopened. How did Lord Walter know that the dashing, straggling hand in which this missive was addressed was that of Madge Wilton? He could not have answered the question; but he felt no doubt as to the fact, and the consequence was that the remainder of Lord Loddondale's harangue was spoken to deaf ears. Perhaps that astute personage took his leave a little more hastily than he might have done if the Goodwood meeting had not been mentioned; yet he paused for a

moment on the threshold and then wheeled round.

"I'm a fool," said he, "and I don't know what business old Nell Travers has to ask impertinent questions; but never mind. Tell her to back Hengist for all she's worth, and you'll do the same yourself if you've any sense. It's the very best certainty I've ever known. Look sharp about it, though, or you won't get a decent price. There! I've done it now, and in about forty-eight hours what I've told you will be known all over the place. I don't expect to be thanked; but if you feel that you owe me a turn, you can pay me off by letting me know the next time that Miss Shafto comes to examine your clay figures. I should like to meet that girl again."

"There's no doubt about it then!" ejaculated Lord Walter. "Miss Shafto may be Lady Loddondale as soon as she chooses. Whether she will choose——"

"Don't be an idiot!" interrupted Lord

Loddondale rather angrily. "I tell you I'm not going to marry anybody. I should like you to marry Miss Shafto if you would; but I suppose you won't. As far as that goes, you ain't half good enough for her, in my opinion; I don't mind telling you that much."

His existence was forgotten the moment that he was out of sight. Under ordinary circumstances Lord Walter would doubtless have been much interested in speculating upon the causes of his brother's unprecedented behaviour; but, as it was, the world contained but one person who interested him in the least. Perhaps she was a flirt; perhaps he had been perfectly right in resolving—as he had done a score of times during the previous night and the present morning—that he would not be made a fool of by her. But—he loved her; and when once you have made such an admission as that, to declare that you will not be made a fool of is only an unmeaning phrase. Lord Walter perused

the note which had been left for him, and as he did so, his countenance became illumined with smiles.

"DEAR LORD WALTER" (Miss Wilton wrote)—

"I don't know whether you ever go to church on Sunday afternoon; but if you don't, you might break through your rule for once and come to St. Andrew's, Wells Street, this afternoon at four o'clock. You will hear some good music, and there's no sermon. My reason for asking this favour of you is that I want *most particularly* to consult you about my costume for that ball which I told you that my sister Constance is going to give. I am sure you could give me an idea if you would. Anyhow, I shall be at St. Andrew's with my cousin Mrs. Langley, and I shall look out for you after the service.

"Sincerely yours,

"MADGE WILTON.

"Why did you go away in such a hurry yesterday? I couldn't think what had become of you."

It is needless to state that Lord Walter was in the appointed place at the appointed hour; and when the congregation had dispersed, he was rewarded by a squeeze of the hand and a grateful glance from Madge's soft eyes.

"This is really good of you!" she exclaimed. "I know I'm a horrid nuisance; but when one is in despair one doesn't care how great a nuisance one may be."

Then she introduced him to Mrs. Langley, a rather pretty little woman, with a complexion about which unkind people said unkind things; and Mrs. Langley, smiling amiably, hoped he would come and have a cup of tea in Portland Place.

"Poor Madge," she explained, "can't think of any dress that will be at once suitable and original, and she scorns all my humble suggestions. Perhaps she will

be more willing to trust your taste than mine."

So Lord Walter, nothing loth, was conducted to the commodious mansion in which this lady dwelt, and after a quarter of an hour of tea and gossip, Mrs. Langley, discovering that she had some letters to write, withdrew to the other end of the drawing-room, which was a large one.

"Now," said Madge, drawing her chair closer to that of her adviser, "let us proceed to business. Have you thought of anything yet, or shall I go through a list of the dresses that nothing would induce me to wear?"

"I have thought of something," answered Lord Walter. "I was thinking about it in church, and I have made up my mind that you must wear an Albanian costume."

Madge drew down the corners of her mouth. "Couldn't you hit upon anything less hackneyed than that?" she asked.

"I don't mean a peasant costume. You are to be an Albanian princess; and your

costume cannot possibly be hackneyed, because I propose to invent it. There are not, and to the best of my belief there never were, any princesses in Albania, and when one is dealing with imaginary persons one is entitled to say how they shall be attired. Perhaps the best plan will be for me to make a rough sketch of my notion."

He took pencil and paper, and in a few minutes handed Madge a hastily executed drawing, which she surveyed critically.

"Yes," she said, "it doesn't look bad. But what about the materials?"

"Well, the skirt and bodice must be of silver brocade. The bodice, as you see, is cut square, and those open, hanging sleeves, as well as the train, ought, I think, to be of white velvet, though I will admit silk if you insist upon it. The embroidery, of course, must be silver. The veil should be gauze. It falls from a diamond tiara over the back of the head, is brought loosely round under the chin and flung over the

right shoulder, where it might be secured by a diamond brooch. White and silver would be trying to a good many people, but not to you, if I may be permitted to say so. The train, I admit, is an objection; but you might have it made with a loop, through which you could pass your arm when you were dancing."

"Yes; that might be done,' answered Madge. She added quietly, "There is just one more trifling objection. I haven't got any diamonds, and this costume would cost at least five or six times as much as I could possibly afford to spend upon it."

"No, indeed; that is the very thing that I was thinking about when I designed it, and you will see that it can be made up quite cheaply. I happen to possess the brocade and embroidery among my artistic properties, and if you will make use of them for the evening, I shall be greatly honoured; so that all you will have to buy will be the material for the train and sleeves and the gauze for the veil. That,

I should think, ought not to come more expensive than any other complete dress that you could wear. As for the diamonds, I should think you might borrow them from somebody. From Lady Huddersfield, for instance."

Madge stroked her chin reflectively, for the matter was one which required to be looked at from several points of view. "I don't know what mamma will say to my wearing your brocade and embroidery," was the comment which she finally made upon Lord Walter's proposition.

"I don't see why Mrs. Wilton should object; they won't have a ticket with my name upon it attached to them," he returned, with a readiness which did credit to his insight into character.

Madge smiled, but still hesitated. She knew that neither the dress nor the jewels were altogether suitable to a girl of her age; but, on the other hand, she had that overwhelming desire to wear diamonds from which so few of her sex are exempt,

and she thought it very likely that Lady Huddersfield could be prevailed upon to lend her the tiara. She ended by saying, "It's very kind of you;" which Lord Walter rightly interpreted as signifying assent.

Presently she asked, "And what are you yourself going to wear?"

"Shall I be there?"

"Of course you will. Didn't you promise me that you would? The invitations will be out in a day or two."

Now, although it may be true that, as Lord Walter had somewhat hastily declared, there have never been any princesses in Albania, it is well known that the country has always been prolific in chieftains; and the costume worn by these, which has now become the national costume of Greece, is also well known and is extremely becoming. He took up his pencil again and drew a figure of a warrior, clad in velvet jacket, hanging sleeves, *fustanella*, tasselled fez, and waist-belt containing the usual armoury

of pistols, daggers, and yataghans. "How would that do?" he asked.

Madge, after examining the sketch, remarked demurely, "I don't quite know what mamma would say to that either."

"But need I consult her? I have the highest possible respect for Mrs. Wilton; still she is not my mamma, you know."

Madge made no rejoinder. She placed the two sketches side by side, contemplating them pensively, and, as he thought, a little sadly.

"Would *you* object?" he ventured to inquire at length.

Then she raised her eyes to his. "Oh no," she answered softly; "*I* shouldn't object."

At this juncture Mrs. Langley, having presumably finished her letters, joined the conspirators and asked whether they were getting any nearer to a decision. On the outline of Madge's proposed costume being submitted and explained to her, she protested loudly.

"Much too old and much too magnificent," she declared. "Everybody in the room will want to know where you got your materials from."

"But everybody needn't be told," returned Madge and Lord Walter in the same breath.

This simultaneous rejoinder seemed to tickle Mrs. Langley, who agreed drily that that was very true. "The individual in the petticoat," she added, "is, I presume, Lord Walter. Well, I beg you both to understand distinctly that I wash my hands of this business. I foresee that it will be disapproved of in more quarters than one, and if you will be advised by me, you will think better of it. But the chances are that you won't be advised by me."

It cannot be said that this advice was tendered in such a fashion as to render its aeceptance probable; and the truth is that Mrs. Langley took a mischievous delight in provoking her aunt, from whom she had

had to submit to a good deal of provocation in days gone by. Also she knew, or thought she knew, perfectly well that the mere fact of having attended a fancy ball as *pendant* to an Albanian chieftain would never prevent Madge Wilton from marrying an English ironmaster.

But Lord Walter was of a different opinion. He went home in jubilant spirits, attaching a significance to Madge's consent to wear his property which he would have been the first to deride had his case been that of another man, and had he been looking on at it. To be acquainted with the peculiarities and frailties of human nature is all very well, and some of us may, by observation, have attained to a certain proficiency in that science; but when we talk about human nature, we don't generally mean either our own nature or that of the persons whom we love.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. LACY'S BALL.

Why Mrs. Wilton permitted her daughter to make use of Lord Walter Sinclair's silver brocade it would be difficult to say. It was a compromising sort of thing to allow one's daughter to do, and a vigilant mother might have been expected to put a prompt veto upon any such proceeding. Yet Mrs. Wilton, who had had great experience and had discharged her maternal functions with singular success, must be assumed to have known what she was about. Perhaps she may have reasoned, as others had done, that the ownership of the brocade need not necessarily be divulged; perhaps she may have been influenced by the good-natured Lady Hud-

dersfield, who had been coaxed into lending the requisite jewels, or by a not unnatural desire to spare her own pocket; it is even possible that she may have wished to rouse the jealousy of Sir Christopher, who continued to be attentive, but who had not yet committed himself, though the season was drawing towards a close. In any case, she did assent in her customary querulous fashion, declaring that the dress was an absurd one, and that it was disagreeable to lay one's self under such obligations to a comparative stranger, but that of course Madge would take her own way.

"Lord Walter Sinclair is making himself quite ridiculous about Madge," she complained to Norma. "He calls every day upon the pretext of altering something in the costume that he has designed for her. Of course no result can possibly come of this, and I don't think Madge cares a farthing for him; still it is rather unpleasant while it lasts. I wish you had not introduced him to us, Norma!"

"But supposing she did care for him?" Norma made bold to suggest. "There is nothing against him, except that he isn't rich, is there? And he is clever and handsome and——"

"But, my dear, she doesn't," interrupted Mrs. Wilton, cutting short the list of Lord Walter's charms. "I can't tell what would happen if she did, and I don't see the use of talking about it. Surely we all have real troubles enough, without discussing imaginary ones!"

Norma did not insist further. It was not Mrs. Wilton's opposition—which might be looked upon as certain—that she had dreaded on Lord Walter's account since he had taken her into his confidence, and the time had not yet come when her intervention could be of any service to him or Madge. That before they were much older they would both stand in need of any support that they could get, she no longer doubted. She thought she saw plainly enough what Mrs. Wilton could not or

would not see—that Madge had been overtaken by the Nemesis which is said to lie in wait for all flirts, and that, having digged a pit for another, she had fallen into the midst of it herself. This was perhaps a good thing; but it would have been a better thing, Norma thought, if her friend had had the courage and the honesty to disabuse Sir Christopher of all illusions. This Madge certainly had not done; and although, as Mrs. Wilton said, Lord Walter found excuses for daily visits to Dover Street, matters were so arranged, or so fell out, that the rivals very seldom met. Therefore it was evident that there was stormy weather ahead.

Meanwhile, Walter Sinclair lived happily in a fool's paradise. He had received no verbal encouragement; on the contrary, many dark hints had been conveyed to him, that the girl whom he loved was not free to follow the dictates of her own heart; but these warnings did not disturb him, because he simply did not believe in them.

Moreover, the signs which Norma had observed had not been lost upon him. Like all lovers, he saw but one great difficulty to be surmounted, and, having now good hope of being victorious in that all-important particular, it was not wonderful that he should have been inclined to make light of subsidiary obstacles. Surely, if Madge cared for him, he would have strength enough and determination enough to rescue her from a thousand Mrs. Wiltons or Sir Christopher Shearmans! It is a natural delusion and one to which we are all prone.

Chancing upon Miss Travers at a dinner-party one evening, he duly delivered to her his brother's message, of which she took note.

"I am glad," she observed, "to find that you are able to remember the needs of your friends in your present semi-imbecile condition."

And on being asked what she meant by that, she replied, "My dear Walter, I

wasn't born yesterday. When I saw that very badly executed head in your studio, I perceived that you were upon the verge of making a fool of yourself, and I have since heard that you have gone beyond the verge. One consolation is that, if matrimony is what you are contemplating, you will soon be shaken back into your senses again; and very soon after that you will be thanking your stars for what I suppose you will consider a misfortune at first."

Lord Walter laughed, not caring to admit or deny anything. That, of course, was just the sort of view which we take of our neighbours' affairs and which our neighbours take of ours. What a fallacy to imagine that lookers-on see most of the game! Very generally, what they see is not the game at all, but only something which superficially resembles it.

Hitherto the attention of lookers-on had been but little attracted to the game which was being played by Lord Walter Sinclair and Miss Wilton, because they had very

seldom been seen in public together; but what were lookers-on to think when the former made his appearance at Mrs. Lacy's ball in a magnificent costume corresponding in every particular to that which rendered the latter so conspicuous? This was a little *coup de théâtre* for which Mrs. Wilton had not been prepared. She had been told, indeed, that Lord Walter was to represent a Greek chieftain; but, having only a faint idea of the whereabouts of Albania, she had not mentally connected it with Greece. Now, however, that she saw the white and silver, the open, hanging sleeves and the embroidery worn by that unscrupulous young man, she realized the full extent of the liberty which he had permitted himself, and bit her lip in vexation. To borrow his brocade was one thing, but to countenance his assumption of the character of Jack to her daughter's Jill was quite another.

Little enough did he reck of an outraged mother's feelings. He did not even notice the marked coldness with which she greeted

him, but passed on in search of Madge, whom he presently found, and to whom he said, "You see I have turned up in time for our first dance."

She smiled and nodded, relinquishing the arm of the Spanish muleteer with whom she had been dancing, and taking Lord Walter's. So this striking couple moved down the ball-room together; and then, no doubt, it was that remarks began to be interchanged amongst the bystanders —remarks more or less ironical, as indeed they could hardly fail to be under the circumstances. Those who knew Miss Wilton also knew her mother and sisters and had difficulty in believing that the impoverished younger brother of a marquis could be the match selected for her by such far-sighted persons. Those who knew Lord Walter considered him cool-headed and worldly-wise, and were naturally amused to see him thus parading himself with a girl who, as they were credibly informed, had no fortune at all.

Madge, perhaps, was aware that she was being talked about, for she seemed a little uneasy, and said at length, "Would you very much mind sitting out this dance? My dress is lovely, and it is a great success, thanks to you; but it *is* a little bit heavy for dancing in."

Lord Walter was quite ready to do anything that she pleased; so long as he had her beside him he was satisfied. He took her out on to the broad balcony, which had been covered in with striped canvas, and was partially lighted by hanging Chinese lanterns. There they found an unoccupied divan, and, possessing themselves of it, fell into a kind of talk which had latterly become usual with them. It was, to tell the truth, a kind of talk which would not bear reporting, being, as regards the words actually spoken, trivial and uninteresting to the last degree; but under cover of it were exchanged hints, innuendoes and allusions which were doubtless interesting enough to the persons concerned. If either

of them found it too indirect to be quite satisfactory, that one was not Madge, who by means of it had discovered all that she could possibly wish to know or that he could desire to tell her. Nevertheless there are certain things which must be stated plainly before any man will consent to understand them, and it now seemed expedient to her to discard ambiguity with reference to one of these.

"Would you," she asked after a time, "be very angry if I begged you, as a great favour, to give up the rest of the dances that I promised you for this evening?"

"I shouldn't be angry," he replied rather blankly; "but I should be grievously disappointed. What have I done?"

"Oh, nothing; only—don't you think it would be better if we were not too much seen together to-night? I warned you, you know, that mamma wouldn't be pleased at your wearing a dress like mine, and as we passed her just now, I saw that she

wasn't. In fact, I am sure that she is very much displeased."

"I am sorry for that; but might we not have the audacity to brave her displeasure, for once?"

"We might; but it wouldn't be very wise, would it? At least, it wouldn't be very wise of me, I mean. To you, I dare say, it wouldn't matter much. In future we shouldn't be at home when you called, that would be all."

Lord Walter remained silent for a moment or two. It would certainly be unwise to defy Mrs. Wilton, and if she chose to shut her door in his face, there was nothing in the world to prevent her from doing so. Yet he would have to fight her or win her over some day. His musings were interrupted by a little sigh from his neighbour.

"You see," she said, "it is just what I am always telling you, and I don't know why you laugh when I say it; I can't do what I like. I have been looking forward

to this ball for weeks, and now I shan't enjoy it at all. But there's no help for it. We mustn't even sit here much longer, and perhaps I shan't see you again before we leave London. We are to go home in a day or two."

"You don't mean that!" ejaculated Lord Walter in dismay. Then, after a pause, "In that case, we may as well dance and enjoy ourselves while we can. If you are going to leave London, my calling in Dover Street would be equally useless whether Mrs. Wilton was pleased with me or not."

"Oh, I didn't mean that quite literally. What I meant was that if you offend mamma, she won't let me speak to you again, and—and we have been such friends —I should be sorry——"

There was a break in the speaker's voice which betrayed genuine emotion and which had the effect of dismissing all Lord Walter's prudence to the winds. "Madge!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Hush!" she whispered; "you must

not say that. I think we will go back to the ballroom now, please."

Nevertheless, she did not move.

As for Lord Walter, he had gone too far to draw back. "I love you, Madge," he said. "That is no news to you; you have known it for some time past. I think, too, you may have known why I have not ventured to say so before. I am a poor man; but perhaps I shall not always be poor. At any rate, if you could give me just a little bit of hope, I should be encouraged to throw my whole heart into my calling—which is really a lucrative calling for those who succeed at it."

A little bit of hope is no great boon to ask for, and Madge might have conceded that much without committing herself in any definite fashion. As she particularly dreaded committing herself, concession would doubtless have been her wisest policy; but she was taken by surprise and was agitated, as well as rather frightened. So she answered hurriedly—

"Please don't say any more; I can't possibly answer you now. But next month we shall be going to Scotland to stay with the Lacys, and I believe their moor is close to Lord Loddondale's, and what I was thinking was that if your brother were to ask you to stay with him——"

"I will take care that he does," said Lord Walter joyfully, as she paused. "Loddondale is a good-natured fellow in his way, and luckily I'm a pretty fair shot. There will be no difficulty as to that. But what about dates?"

"Well, I believe we shall go north about the twelfth, and we are sure to stay at least a month with the Lacys. Now take me back to the ball-room."

He prepared to obey her; he had obtained all that he had hoped for and was more than satisfied. But, as ill luck would have it, at this moment there appeared upon the scene a burly little red-bearded man, habited as Henry VIII., who ejaculated, "Oho!"

Madge had extracted a half-promise from her sister that Sir Christopher Shearman should not be invited to this ball; yet here Sir Christopher was, and a glance at his flushed face would have sufficed to convince anybody that he was in a very naughty temper. After the above ejaculation, he contorted his features into what he probably intended for a sardonic smile and said, "I suppose, Miss Wilton, I may congratulate you."

"Upon what?" asked Madge, laughing rather tremulously. "Upon my costume?"

"No, I don't admire your costume. My bad taste, I dare say; but I don't. What I'm told that I ought to congratulate you upon is your engagement to Lord Walter Sinclair. Half a dozen people have been good enough to inform me of it since I arrived. On my own account, I beg to add my congratulations upon the success with which you have kept it dark up to now."

Even in that dim light Lord Walter could see that Madge's colour faded. She turned her affrighted eyes first upon Sir Christopher, who was looking very fierce, and then upon him. "It isn't true! Please tell him it isn't true!" she gasped.

Now Lord Walter was not very much inclined to comply with this request. Sir Christopher had taken a most unwarrantable liberty and deserved no answer. He thought, too, that Sir Christopher had been drinking, which may or may not have been the case. Still, since he had been appealed to, he could scarcely remain silent, so he said very coldly—

"There seems to be some mistake. Perhaps the resemblance between my dress and Miss Wilton's may be accountable for it."

"And quite enough to account for it too!" cried Sir Christopher, still angry, though evidently relieved. "How any man can deliberately compromise a lady in that way, unless he wants mistakes to be made, passes my understanding."

"Your understanding," observed Lord Walter sweetly, "is perhaps not a very capacious one."

After that, it seemed high time to avert a hand-to-hand conflict. Madge, rising to the level of the occasion, burst out laughing.

"How ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "I am sure there must be plenty of other men in Greek costumes in the room, and people can't imagine that I am engaged to them all. However, I will carefully shun them for the rest of the evening. Sir Christopher will have to be upon his guard too, or he may find himself dancing with one of Henry VIII.'s six wives. Meanwhile, I certainly mustn't show myself any more with you, Lord Walter."

She held out her hand to him, saying, "Good night and good-bye, if we don't meet again." Then she took Sir Christopher's arm and was led away.

Lord Walter, though he had no very high opinion of human nature, was neither jealous nor suspicious by temperament.

He saw that Madge was anxious to gain time; but he did not complain of that. She could not marry him without incurring some sacrifice of material comfort, and it was only fair that she should have leisure to consider whether that sacrifice was worth making. That she should wish to keep upon good terms with Sir Christopher was also quite intelligible; for if she fell out with him she would fall out with her mother, which would, of course, be uncomfortable, and was as yet unnecessary. No doubt he would have been less philosophic if he had been less confident; but how could he help being confident? Not to have been refused was virtually equivalent to having been accepted; and as he lingered a while in the ball-room, watching Madge while she danced with the appeased Sir Christopher, he freely forgave the impertinence of that defeated rival.

Presently he was accosted by a Roman senator with an eyeglass, in whom he recognized Mr. Winstanley-Pettie; and

Mr. Pettie said, "Your little friend Miss Wilton is a gorgeous spectacle to-night, isn't she? I wonder where the deuce she got her diamonds from! Do you suppose Lady Huddersfield lent them to her? Well, she'll have diamonds of her own before long; I hear that fat little chap Shearman is crazy about her. Sorry for you; you'll have to drop her acquaintance, I'm afraid."

"Shall I?" said Lord Walter.

"I should rather think you would!—a man of your personal attractions! Besides, I've heard it whispered that your appearing here as a couple of Albanians wasn't altogether an accident, and Shearman has heard it too. Never mind, my dear fellow; between ourselves, I don't much envy Miss Wilton's future husband."

"That is a very fortunate thing for Miss Wilton's future husband."

"Eh? Well, it's a fortunate thing for me. To fall in love with a flirt," added Mr. Pettie impressively, "is just about the

most disastrous calamity that can happen to a man."

But Lord Walter went home to dream of Madge without any presentiment of approaching disaster.

CHAPTER XIV.

LORD WALTER GOES TO SEEK HIS FORTUNE.

Mrs. Lacy's ball was the last entertainment of the kind which was favoured by Walter Sinclair's presence that season, nor was any further opportunity of bidding Madge farewell granted to him. His brocade and embroidery were returned on the following day with a very pretty little note of thanks, in which Madge said—

"I hope so much I may see you in Scotland. I am rather in despair at having to leave London—at least, I should be if I had time to think about it; but we are so busy packing up and making preparations for a move that I can't indulge my sorrow. I shall have plenty of leisure for regrets

during the long, dull weeks that are coming."

Lord Walter took the hint and made no reply, either verbally or by letter. The long weeks that were coming must necessarily be weeks of suspense for him; but he did not think that they would be dull, because he meant to devote them to a steady prosecution of art. He had no longer, indeed, any great temptation to be idle. Everybody was going away; the season was expiring; such luckless legislators as had been unable to find pairs were in no humour for entertaining their acquaintances; and although Miss Travers was kind enough to say that there would be a spare room in the house which she and some friends of hers had taken at Bognor for the Goodwood week, that was an invitation which could be declined without any poignant sense of sacrifice.

However, he thought he ought to go and say good-bye to the Shaftos, who, he presumed, would shortly be flitting like the

rest of the world. He called in Upper Belgrave Street rather late one afternoon, and was glad to learn that Miss Shafto was at home. Possibly he may have desired to say something more than good-bye to Miss Shafto, whose alliance had hitherto been of little service to him, and from whom he might ere long have to claim more active support. It was therefore annoying to find that she was not alone. Seated upon a sofa beside her, in a lounging attitude which struck the new-comer as neither respectful nor becoming, was the long-haired young man whom he remembered to have seen at the theatre and who had the impudence to screw up his eyes at him as though he had been an intruder.

"I don't know whether you know Mr. Morley," Norma said. "Lord Walter Sinclair—Mr. Morley."

Lord Walter bowed, and Mr. Morley, rising very slowly from his recumbent position, bent his head and heaved a sigh.

He was certainly a very ill-bred youth, and one cannot wonder that Lord Walter should have longed to kick him, though, to be sure, he had as good a right as anybody else to be where he was. It was Basil Morley's misfortune that he had never been adequately kicked. In his earlier years his companions had done their best for him in that direction; but it must be assumed that their boots were not thick enough, or that his skin was too thick. He sank back upon the sofa without the faintest idea of having ruffled anybody's susceptibilities. In fact, his belief was that he himself had a grievance.

"Then, Miss Shafto," said he, in low and tender accents, "this is to be our last meeting in London, I fear."

"As you are going home to-morrow morning, I am afraid it is," answered Norma. "Please don't forget to give my love to your mother."

"And when shall we meet again? Will you not make an effort to show yourself in

a neighbourhood where you are—I may say it without exaggeration—adored by rich and poor alike?"

"I can't say for certain what we shall do as yet. Of course I should like very much to pay a flying visit to Brampton, and the Wiltons have asked us to stay with them in the autumn, but everything must depend upon my father's plans."

"Mr. Shafto's plans must surely be capable of being moulded in accordance with your wishes. I can't conceive that any one could live with you and not feel constrained by an overpowering necessity to do what you desired."

Having paid this handsome tribute to Norma's powers of fascination, Mr. Morley glanced at Lord Walter, sighed again, and got up. "About that little volume of poems," he began.

"Yes?" said Norma.

"I was thinking—— But no matter. Perhaps it would be better that you should not see them until they are in print. Then

I shall make so bold as to crave your acceptance of a copy."

He held Norma's hand for a minute, gazed eloquently into her eyes, inclined his head once more to the stranger, and so retired, steering his way through the furniture with graceful, deliberate steps.

"Well," exclaimed Lord Walter, "I *must* say——"

"Oh no, I don't think you must," interrupted Norma, laughing. "If I don't know all that there is to be said against poor Mr. Morley it isn't the fault of my friends. He is silly and affected, if you like; but many of those who abuse him are quite as silly as he, though they may not be quite as affected."

"Meaning me?"

"No, I don't mean you. No one would be likely to call you silly."

"Thank you, but I dare say I am silly, all the same. Who knows? One generally has to await results before one can say whether any man's behaviour is silly or

wise. What seems clear is that one's behaviour isn't in all respects under one's own control. Do you think Miss Wilton's is, for example?"

"In what way do you mean?"

"I mean, do you think she is really frightened of her mother?"

That was exactly what Norma did not know. She could sympathize with everybody, but she could not understand everybody; and having plenty of courage herself, she had difficulty in believing that any girl could be coerced by a peevish old woman into doing what she not only disliked but knew to be wrong. No doubt she underestimated the power of peevish old women, which is in reality enormous. At length she said—

"If you ask me, I think everything depends upon yourself. Girls generally doubt whether a man is in earnest until he has spoken out."

"Well, I have done that," answered Lord Walter, who then related what had

taken place at Mrs. Lacy's ball, and begged Miss Shafto to give him her honest opinion of his chances. He was in truth very sanguine, and wanted rather to obtain some promise of assistance as against Mrs. Wilton than to be told what he already knew, that, since he had not been refused, he had been in a measure accepted. It was therefore something of a surprise and disappointment to him when Norma said—

"I can't tell you; Madge has rather avoided me of late. But it is a pity that you did not make her give you a distinct answer. If she had once confessed that she cared for you, it would be different. Mrs. Wilton is not a wicked woman. She has done her best to find rich husbands for her daughters, and one can't blame her for that; but I don't think she would urge any daughter of hers to marry a rich man, knowing quite well that she loved a poor one."

"It seems to me," observed Lord Walter,

"that the question is not whether she has said that she cares for me, but whether she does care for me."

Perhaps that was the question; of course it ought by rights to be the question; but Norma was not certain about it. However, on being further consulted, she readily promised to give her confidant such aid as it might be in her power to give, and she strongly advised him to be in Scotland as soon after the twelfth as possible. "Because," she added, "I should not at all wonder if Mr. Lacy were to ask Sir Christopher Shearman down for the grouse-shooting."

"I suppose you won't be in Scotland this summer?" Lord Walter said.

"Oh no; papa has taken a house at Folkestone for three months, and I don't know what we shall do after that. If we can find a tenant for this house, we shall go abroad most likely."

Upon the whole, Lord Walter went away not ill satisfied with the upshot of this

conference and sincerely grateful for the friendly spirit in which he had been met. Rightly or wrongly, he was persuaded that Miss Shafto had great influence over her friends, and that this influence would be exerted on his behalf he had been assured. Also she had begged him to write to her as soon as he should have any news to communicate.

The following day brought him a little piece of good fortune in the shape of an invitation to join his brother's shooting party in Aberdeenshire on the eighteenth. Thus he was spared the disagreeable necessity of asking to be asked; and during the period of quiet and solitude which intervened between the day of his visit to Norma and that of his departure for the north he worked hard and steadily. It was then, indeed, that he conceived and partially executed the exquisite female figure which, under the name of "Suspense," has since become celebrated.

Suspense is not always painful; that is

to say that it is not painful to all temperaments. Lord Walter, when the time came for him to journey northwards, set forth with feelings of pleasurable excitement rather than of trepidation. He slept at Edinburgh, not caring to submit to the misery of an all-night journey; and on the succeeding evening reached Lord Loddondale's shooting-lodge, where he found four other guests besides himself assembled. During dinner the talk was of sport and of nothing else; but afterwards, when three of the party had fallen asleep and had dropped their cigars, the survivor said casually to his host—

"Do you know anything about your neighbour Lacy, Loddondale?"

"Dick Lacy?" answered Lord Loddondale. "Oh yes; I know him a little. Not a bad sort of fellow. Friend of yours, by the way, Walter—or at least his sister-in-law is. More by token, she is staying there now, with her old mother. A man who asks his mother-in-law to stay with

him for three or four weeks at a stretch must be a good sort of fellow, eh?"

"And a man who asks that little cad Shearman to stay with him must be next door to an angel," remarked the first speaker, laughing.

"Is Sir Christopher Shearman there?" inquired Lord Walter.

"Rather! That's why Mrs. Wilton and her daughter are there, I take it. The beggar can shoot, I'll say that for him; but I shouldn't care to have him in the house, and I certainly shouldn't care to lend a hand in marrying my wife's sister to him—if I had a wife and she had a sister. One understands women doing that sort of thing; but a man ought to know better. I was thinking of that when I asked Loddondale whether he knew anything of Lacy."

Lord Loddondale screwed up his little red eyes and grinned. "Bless your innocence!" said he; "you don't suppose a married man is master in his own house, do you?"

The subject was not pursued much further, and everybody retired to bed at an early hour. As for Lord Walter, he was a little, but not very much, disquieted by what he had heard. That Sir Christopher should be staying with the Lacys was, after all, no surprise to him, though of course it might prove to be something of an inconvenience.

The next day he was out on the moor from early morning to late evening, and the object of this unremitting attention to business was achieved in the shape of a very heavy bag, to which Lord Walter contributed his fair share. It was hard work; but none of the men seemed to mind it. They were enthusiastic sportsmen and excellent shots, and if they had not been both, would hardly have been invited to occupy their present quarters. Lord Walter, who was in anything but first-rate condition after so many months of London, was thoroughly tired out before nightfall, and was not sorry for it, as this gave him

a plausible excuse for announcing that he meant to take a rest on the morrow. His fellow-guests remonstrated with him; but Lord Loddondale, who was not as a rule lenient to shirkers, only laughed.

"I suppose you're going over to Lacy's place to-morrow, Walter," he remarked, halting for a moment at his brother's door on his way up to bed.

"Well, yes, I think very likely I shall," answered Lord Walter; "I ought to call there. Is it far off?"

"Take the dog-cart, if you like; but you'll have a bad road and a roundabout one. You could walk it in less than an hour. Somebody will show you the way. If I were you, I shouldn't go at all; but then I'm not you, thank goodness! Well, I dare say you won't want to go a second time. Good night."

Lord Loddondale walked away, laughing. Little as he went into society, he heard something of its gossip, and both Lady Huddersfield and Mrs. Lacy were well-

known people. From what he had been told of them, as well as of Mrs. Wilton, he did not imagine that a very cordial reception was in store for his younger brother.

But no such apprehensions disturbed the rest of Lord Walter, who slept like a top and did not wake until long after the sportsmen had resumed their daily labours. He spent a long, pleasant morning all by himself, lying full length upon the heathery ground which surrounded the shooting-lodge, reading the newspapers and dreaming. It was a hot, still day; the rounded outlines of the middle distance and the far-away blue hills were softened by a haze which spread itself over the whole sky towards noon; there was a slumberous murmur of insects in the air, and from the earth arose the faint, slightly pungent odour which belongs to the moors. Under such conditions the least imaginative men are tempted to indulge in day-dreams; and indeed they might be worse employed. We all have in us the elements of per-

fectibility: it is not difficult to conceive of a society from which greed, selfishness, and all the meaner vices which disfigure ourselves and our neighbours should be eliminated; it is not difficult to ascribe to a given fellow-creature those attributes which all ought to possess; and it is as easy as anything can be to picture a married life made up of graceful harmonies. Of course the realities of existence are for the most part hard and ugly. Births, illnesses, deaths, with their attendant circumstances; weekly bills, the adverse criticisms of an ill-informed press, the dreadful tedium of social intercourse—these are not very pretty things to contemplate; but then there is no reason at all why one should contemplate them on a summer's day. They form a part—and a tolerably large part too—of our earthly lot; but they do not form the whole of it, and if Walter Sinclair was able for a brief space to realize mentally ideals which were not actually realizable, he was by so much

the better off. Madge Wilton did not happen to be his ideal of feminine excellence, so that he had a little trouble in the construction of his airy castles; but he managed to construct them, in spite of all obstacles, and went indoors at length to eat his luncheon with a light heart and a fine appetite.

Towards three o'clock he made inquiries as to the way to Inverstrachan, which was the name of Mr. Lacy's house, and was offered the services of a lad to conduct him thither; but verbal instructions, together with a cursory study of the Ordnance map, seemed to be sufficient, and presently he set forth to learn his fate. For he felt very sure that his fate would be decided, one way or the other, within the next few hours.

The weather by this time had begun to show signs of an approaching change; the atmosphere had become stifling, and heavy cirro-cumulus clouds were drifting slowly up against the feeble westerly breeze. "We

shall have a thunderstorm before sunset," thought Lord Walter. "Well, I don't much care, so long as I get to the end of my walk without a wetting."

And it occurred to him that to be detained at Inverstrachan by stress of weather might not, perhaps, be such a very disagreeable experience. He laughed a little as he imagined the scene—Madge standing beside him at the window, looking out to see whether it wasn't going to clear; Sir Christopher angry and suspicious; Mrs. Wilton fretful and uneasy; Mrs. Lacy—he had seen Mrs. Lacy at her own ball, in the guise of Semiramis—a faded, tired-looking woman, who bore a strong family likeness to her mother, and who would doubtless be prepared to act as her mother's chief of the staff in the impending campaign. Well, supposing he were to take all these bulls by the horns? Would not that be the most straightforward and the wisest course to adopt? He really was not very much afraid of them; and

why should poor little Madge have to bear the whole brunt of their attacks?

"Mrs. Wilton," Norma had said, "is not a wicked woman," and in truth it did not seem at all likely that she was. A little good-humoured determination would suffice, he thought, to vanquish her. One could not expect that she would be pleased; but one might venture to look forward to the probability of her becoming resigned. However, there was one preliminary obstacle in his path. By means of some stratagem or other, he must contrive to get private speech of Madge, and the consideration of how this was to be accomplished gave ample scope to his ingenuity as he tramped briskly over the rocks and heather.

But it appeared that the stars in their courses were fighting in his favour; for hardly had he made out Inverstrachan, a solid gray mansion, standing beneath a sheltering shoulder of the hills, when he also distinguished a solitary female figure

approaching him. There was no mistaking the identity of that small person, though she wore a shooting-skirt and a deerstalker, which altered her aspect a little from that which he had been accustomed to associate with her. It was evident, too, that she had seen him, and was making straight for him. She was walking up hill, and he down; so he quickened his pace to a run, and in a very few minutes he was holding her by both hands.

A light of welcome was in her eyes and a smile upon her lips; she did not seem to resent the impetuosity of his unspoken greeting, nor did she withdraw her hands. All was well, then! Mrs. Wilton and Mrs. Lacy and Sir Christopher might gnash their teeth or tear their hair or submit to the inevitable with a good grace, as might seem best to them; for they were beaten before the fight had begun.

CHAPTER XV.

LORD WALTER IS ANSWERED.

MADGE gently freed herself at length from the grip of her jubilant suitor, who, for his part, was willing to release her, pending explanations which might be superfluous, but which were not likely to be protracted.

"I am so glad I met you!" she said. "Were you on your way to Inverstrachan? I had a sort of idea that you might look us up to-day."

"Of course I was on my way to Inverstrachan. I only arrived forty-eight hours ago, and I was obliged to shoot all yesterday; but to-day I made my escape on the plea of being tired out. How did you know that I was in these parts?"

She laughed. "Oh, I heard that you

were expected; one hears a great many things when one has a maid who is upon terms of intimacy with somebody else's valet."

"And you came out on purpose to meet me? How good of you!"

"Indeed, I did nothing of the sort! The men are shooting, and my mother and sister have gone for a drive, and I am taking a constitutional, that is all."

That was, at any rate, all that she could be expected to say, and Lord Walter felt it to be quite enough. "And are you glad to see me?" he asked, for the pleasure of hearing her repeat that she was.

She coloured a little, and laughed again. "I am not sure that I ought to be," she replied; "but it *is* pleasant to meet one's friends; and all the mothers and sisters in the world can't make it unpleasant, can they?"

"I hope not."

"Although," added Madge, with a sigh, "they can make most things unpleasant.

You haven't any mother or any sisters, have you?"

Lord Walter regretted that he had not.

"I wouldn't be too regretful over it, if I were you. There are deprivations which are blessings in disguise."

In the overflowing gladness and charity of his heart, Lord Walter was very nearly taking up the cudgels on behalf of mothers and sisters whose intentions were doubtless good in the main; for who cares to trample upon a fallen foe? But for the moment he had matters of greater importance than that to talk about.

"You see," he said, "I have obeyed your orders by coming to Scotland, and I have lost as little time as possible about it too. Loddondale only asked me for the eighteenth, or I should have come sooner."

"My orders?" she repeated, with a wondering look. "Oh, you mean that night at the ball. Yes; I believe I did say that I hoped we might come across one another in the Highlands; but of course I

never meant that you were to make a point of it. In fact, if you won't mind my speaking plainly, I couldn't promise you a very warm welcome at Inverstrachan. Constance Lacy says Lord Loddondale asks such very odd people to stay with him, and there never has been any visiting between the two houses, and—and—don't you think it would perhaps be better if you didn't call?"

This speech was not altogether agreeable to Lord Walter. He had no fancy for clandestine meetings, and had, besides, sense enough to know that he would put himself entirely in the wrong by consenting to anything of the kind. Yet this was obviously what Madge was hinting at. He did not think the worse of her for the suggestion. No doubt the poor girl had been bullied and worried at home, and it was natural enough that she should be tempted to deceive those whose method of treating her had been of that kind which inevitably engenders deception.

Nevertheless, he must make her understand that honesty was best, and indeed the only policy for her to pursue.

He was casting about him for words which should convey his meaning without making him appear too priggish, when the first drop of the approaching storm created a diversion by falling with a splash upon his nose. The thunder had been already for some time grumbling among the distant hills; and that these two persons must have been very much interested in one another is proved by the circumstance that neither of them had as yet bestowed a word or a thought upon atmospheric conditions. Now, however, it was no longer possible to ignore the imminence of a thorough drenching.

"What shall we do!" exclaimed Madge. "It is going to deluge; and there isn't a roof to cover us anywhere between this and Inverstrachan."

It was, at all events, evident that Inverstrachan could not possibly be reached

before the storm broke. Lord Walter pointed this out; and even as he spoke, a furious gust of wind, accompanied by driving rain, swept over the moor. There was nothing for it but to seek such shelter as could be found under the lee of an overhanging boulder; and for a few minutes it seemed as if that would suffice for all intents and purposes. Lord Walter made Madge crouch down beneath it, and, despite her remonstrances, insisted upon taking off his coat and wrapping it round her shoulders. As a matter of fact, it was only the fringe of the thunderstorm that reached them, the distant hills having drawn it away; still the lightning was vivid enough and the thunder loud enough to alarm a nervous person, and Madge declared that she was frightened out of her wits.

"I am a dreadful coward," she said, looking up deprecatingly at her neighbour. "Did you know that before? At any rate, you know it now."

A dispassionate looker-on might have thought that Miss Wilton was hardly fair to herself, for she had not turned pale nor was she trembling; and in truth physical cowardice was not one of her defects. But perhaps no lover expects or particularly wishes the woman whom he loves to be physically brave. Lord Walter comforted and encouraged her, at first by words, and then—for of course they were very close to one another—by action. Under all the circumstances, it was neither a very audacious nor a very unnatural thing to pass his arm round her waist; but the moment that he did so she started away from him, exclaiming with an agitation which was not feigned this time, "No—no! You mustn't!"

But he did not mind that; because it was quite necessary that there should be a clear understanding between them, and this seemed to be as good an occasion as another for initiating it. Taking her by the hand, he drew her gently back under

the rock, from the protection of which she had sprung, and said—

"Madge, I have either taken a great liberty, or I have done nothing that ought to offend you. Which is it? You know I love you, and you know I am only here to ask you whether you will be my wife or not. It's a great deal to ask; and yet, if you love me, I suppose you won't think it a great deal. It just comes to this, that I am a poor man, and that I have no certain prospect of ever being anything else."

Madge shook her head sorrowfully. "All the nice people are poor," she sighed. And then, laughing a little, "Do you think that is the way in which Providence tries to keep things pretty comfortable all round? It isn't a very successful way. I should make all the horrid men, like Sir Christopher Shearman and Baron Lämmergeier, paupers, and hand their wealth over to the others. Then at least somebody would be happy; and as for the Lämmer-

geiers and Shearmans, I dare say it would improve their manners immensely to break stones on the road. Just fancy if you were only moderately rich—ten thousand a year, or something like that. What fun we might have! A house in Mayfair and a moor in Scotland, if you cared for that, and perhaps a modest little yacht. Then in the winter we would go up the Nile or travel about in sunny places. I sometimes dream of it."

It was a seductive picture, no doubt; and it was pleasant to hear that anything of the kind had been the subject of her dreams. No one will be unreasonable enough to expect of a man so deeply in love as Walter Sinclair that he should cavil at the selfishness of such visions. "I am afraid," he answered, "that I shall never have ten thousand a year; about a fifth of that will be more like it. Even with what I have we could get on; though I don't deny that it might be prudent to wait a little."

"Prudent or imprudent," said Madge sadly, "it isn't to be thought of. Indeed, I ought not to stay and listen to you; only"—and here she began to laugh again, though in a somewhat lachrymose way—"I can't very well go away until it stops raining."

At that moment the rain was coming down in torrents, and, the wind having dropped, our friends were scarcely drier in their place of refuge than they would have been upon the open moor. But to one of them at least that was a matter of small consequence.

"Madge," he said earnestly, "let us look things in the face. We shall have a bad quarter of an hour—perhaps a bad week or two; but I suppose we can survive that much, and——"

"You don't know," interrupted Madge, "what mamma is."

"Well, I know, of course, that she wants you to marry Sir Christopher Shearman."

Madge jumped up. "I had better tell you the truth," she exclaimed desperately; "I am going to marry him."

Lord Walter ought not to have been very much astonished; but he was astonished, and what was more, he was disgusted. "Going to marry him!" he repeated. "You can't mean that you have accepted the man!"

"I couldn't help accepting him; didn't I tell you just now that I am a coward? I can't bear to be scolded from morning to night. I would marry anybody rather than be scolded, and I knew all along that I should have to marry Sir Christopher in the end. So did mamma, or she would never have allowed you to come and see us as often as you did in London."

There was a pause; after which Lord Walter said, in a slightly altered tone, "One thing at least I have a right to ask: do you love me or not?"

"But surely," remonstrated Madge, "that is just what you have no right to ask.

Even if I did, I couldn't confess it, now that I am engaged to somebody else. Could I?"

It is not very easy to look dignified or imposing when you are in your shirt-sleeves and are dripping from head to foot into the bargain; but Lord Walter was tall and handsome, and the set of his features when he was angered was very stern. It may have been this, or it may have been a guilty conscience, that caused Madge to cower before him, and drop her eyes, while he stood gazing at her in silence.

"I don't know why we should quarrel about it," she murmured; "it isn't my fault that we are both poor. I thought you would be sorry for me; but instead of that, you seem to think that it is you who are ill-used."

Well, if he did think so he might, no doubt, have given reasons for holding that opinion; but his inclination, after the first moment, was not to upbraid her. What he was resolved to do, if it could possibly

be done, was to persuade her to break off this unnatural engagement; and very much surprised he was to find that, notwithstanding all the eloquence that he had at command, it could not be done. Madge let him talk, and made no attempt to defend herself, and shed a few tears; but for any effect that his words produced upon her beyond that, he might as well have pleaded with the rock against which she was leaning. Meanwhile a brisk breeze had sprung up, clearing away the clouds, and the sun was shining once more. Madge took the coat off her shoulders, and handed it back to its owner.

"I must go," she said. "And you had better go home too as quickly as you can, or you will be catching cold or rheumatic fever or something."

"Are we to part like this, then?" he asked. "Did you bring me to Scotland only to tell me that you are engaged to Sir Christopher Shearman?"

"I didn't bring you to Scotland. I don't

know what you mean," she returned. "I thought you were so nice; but I see you are just like mamma and all the others. You only think of yourself, and the moment that you don't get what you want you begin to scold. Nobody is really nice, except Norma Shafto."

There was a spice of truth in this childish reproach which almost made Lord Walter laugh, little as he was disposed to merriment. Presently he said—

"I will try to be less selfish, then. I will put myself out of the question—as indeed I must, for you have shown me plainly enough that you don't care for me as I hoped you might—and I will only entreat you for your own sake to dismiss this man, whom you make no pretence of loving. I don't think you can realize what you are doing."

"He will be kind to me," said Madge meditatively.

"And you will have plenty of money, which is always a great consolation."

It was the first bitter speech that he had made to her, and he was ashamed of it as soon as it had passed his lips; but he had no need to repent, for she took it quite literally.

"Yes," she agreed, "there is that. And money *is* a great consolation, as every one knows."

What more could be said? Lord Walter simply took off his hat and turned away. But such was her innate kindness of heart that she did not wish him to depart in anger.

"How disagreeable you are!" she exclaimed. "Why should we not be friends still?"

"To be candid," he replied, "I don't think it would be very easy for us to remain friends. We can be acquaintances, if you please; though perhaps even that would be scarcely desirable. Speaking for myself, I would rather remember you as you were a few weeks ago than know you as Lady Shearman."

"Very well," said Madge, drawing herself up; "if you choose to blame me for my misfortunes, I can't help it. Sir Christopher has a horrid temper; but I don't think it is as bad as yours, and I don't think he is as unjust as you either. Good-bye."

He did not attempt to detain her; though he saw that she was not unwilling to be detained. He could not tell her that he was sorry for her, nor could he quite forgive her. Very likely a certain amount of pressure had been brought to bear upon her; but that she had made any serious endeavour to resist that pressure it was impossible to suppose; and she had as good as admitted that Sir Christopher's money would compensate her for the life-long companionship of Sir Christopher. He watched her for a few seconds, while she slowly made her way down the hill-side, then turned on his heel and strode off in the opposite direction.

There are certain matters of fact, so well known and universally admitted as to be mere commonplaces, which nevertheless seldom fail to startle those to whom they are brought home by personal experience. We all know that women constantly marry for money or position; yet we are always a little surprised when any woman we have liked acts in this way. Walter Sinclair, who had not only liked Madge, but had fallen in love with her, was a great deal more horrified by her cynicism than he had appeared to be. It was unnatural, he thought; though if the circumstances had been narrated to him by anybody else, he would have pronounced them to be perfectly natural and just what might have been anticipated. Either way, there was an end of his hopes. He had had his answer, which had been as final as could be wished, and the sooner he took himself out of the country the better.

During dinner he was asked no questions

as to how he had spent the afternoon, and he flattered himself that his countenance told no tales; nevertheless, Lord Loddondale, whose little red eyes were sharp ones, found an opportunity later in the evening of saying to him, not unkindly—

"You've had a facer, haven't you, old man? I knew you would; but there wasn't much use in telling you so."

"Well, then—yes, I have," answered Walter, who knew that he would be obliged to admit the truth presently, and thought he might as well do so without further waste of words. "I don't want it talked about; but that is just what has happened to me; so, if you don't mind, I'll be off south again to-morrow morning. I can't stay on here, under the circumstances."

"Do as you like, of course," said his brother; "but I don't myself see why you should run away. You're deuced well out of it, let me tell you, though you mayn't think so now, and there's nothing like

sport to make one forget these little disappointments. As for your meeting the girl again, you're no more likely to do that here than if you were in London."

"Perhaps not; but I shall go rather further away than London, I think; and I don't mind acknowledging that the disappointment isn't a little one."

"Oh, you'll get over it; you'll be all right," said Lord Loddondale encouragingly. "Take my word for it, there's only one way in which a woman can give you a great disappointment, and that is by marrying you. However, you're sure to marry; and, as I told you before, if I were in your shoes, I should try to marry Miss Shafto. She's exceptional; I don't believe she would disappoint anybody."

"Then why don't you try to marry her yourself?"

"For several good reasons, which I ain't going to tell you. Good night, Walter; turn it over in your mind, and if to-morrow morning you feel inclined to

stay where you are, we shall all be very glad. If you don't, I'll keep your secret. It isn't over and above likely that Miss Wilton will, though; they never do."

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